Honeysuckle

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Honeysuckle

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Summary

“You get used to the cold,” he whispered, aware of the thin layer of tension between them, fragile and breakable. His eyes were caught on Hannibal's form; it was shining, glittering.

“One can get used to a lot of things,” Hannibal spoke, words uttered like they meant a thousand things, a thousand things Will didn't know, a thousand things he didn't understand, and he desperately wanted to.

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The Games, despite ending officially, lived on inside Will each night. Hannibal Lecter was still a beautiful, haunting mystery and things were far from over between them. There was more to come.

There was more President Verger had planned for them.

Chapter 1

Rushing water and incessantly noisy birds were the only sounds he heard at the river, usually.

Now, however, the sound of Abigail's humming was added to that list.

He'd spent a lot of time here with her, since he'd got back. Far too much. But he'd nearly died, never to see her again, and this was an easy reminder of *before*, as living in their new house in the Victors' Village was drastically different to the tiny cabin they'd lived in all those months ago. They'd tried to go back there a few times, just to look around. They were *allowed* to, considering they technically still owned it… but it wasn't the same. It had been empty. Not of furniture, but of life. It didn't hold the same atmosphere of *home*. It was just another cabin, that came along with some added memories and fondness.

The song she was humming was pretty. It was a melodic tune about meadows that Will remembered from his childhood. He watched as she jumped across stepping stones, a great big smile on her face.

“Have you missed him?”

“Who?”

“Hannibal.”

“I suppose so, yes.”

“Are you scared things won't be the same?”

Will drew in a sharp breath. She was more perceptive than he remembered. It had been *months* since he'd seen Hannibal. Around six months, to be more accurate. Half a year was a long time to be without someone, and a lot had changed. Perhaps 'scared' wasn't the word he wanted to use, it was more… apprehensive. What if things *weren't* the same? The situation was entirely different- before, they had been in the Games and terrified, and then immediately out of the Games and still terrified. Time had passed. The Games were ancient history. He and Hannibal might not share the same connection.

Except… the Games *weren't* ancient history. They never would be. They never *could* be. Not for him. Will went back to them, again and again, every single night. All the victors did.

Perhaps things hadn't really changed at all, not between him and Hannibal.

He wouldn't know until they saw each other, which was now officially in a week. One week until the Victory Tour. One week until he would have to see the faces of the tributes he watched die around him, the tributes that he had had a hand in killing. He had been lucky. He'd escaped the arena unscathed, the two people he wanted by his side alive and well, but these families had lost everything. Their children, their brothers, their sisters. Nearly Will's whole family was intact. He felt guilty for it.

“I haven't really thought about it,” he muttered.

“Because it hasn't crossed your mind or because you've been trying not to?”

“A bit of both, I think,” he admitted. “I don't know… It's complicated. I shouldn't be talking to you about this.”

She just smiled, looking wise beyond her years, and ceased her questions, realising he wouldn't elect to tell her anymore information. When he'd come back, only a few weeks after he'd left, it had felt like she'd grown half a foot. She hadn't even grown an inch, but the image of her he'd held in his head had become distorted after not seeing her for so long. His first few hours home, she'd looked like a stranger. Her hair was longer, she was taller, she'd looked at him differently. The first two were just manifestations of his adjustment back home, and he'd got over them, but the latter was not. Even now, there was something different in her eyes when she looked at him. Something sad and dark and scared. Something a thirteen year old shouldn't have in her eyes when looking at her big brother.

She'd seen everything.

He hadn't discussed anything that had happened in the Games with her, but it was obvious. She'd watched him beat Tier to death. She'd watched him almost get raped. The Tier situation had probably frightened her half to death. Seeing him like that, fighting to survive, becoming instinct only and nothing else. And Brown… he could barely imagine. She had idolised him, before. He could do anything. He could protect her from anything. The Games had made him more vulnerable than ever, and she had seen it all. Their dynamic just wasn't the same, now she saw him clearly. He missed when she hadn't.

Nothing was the same, not between them.

But how could it be, really? Everything *else* had changed. They weren't shoved together in a small bedroom in their tiny little house anymore, with only each other and their mother for company in the evenings. The Victors' Village was vast and open, with tall buildings and rich surroundings- it was in stark contrast to the rest of the District, which wasn't completely run-down, but certainly wasn't *that* affluent. Their new house was the same. The rooms seemed to go on forever, with high ceilings and tall windows, facing a view of the sea, a little ways in the distance. Sometimes at night, when everyone else was asleep and he was wide awake due to his persistent nightmares, he would stare out of them, gazing into the distance where the great blue sea was slightly illuminated by the moon and stars. He would think of his father, a man who had never been to this place, a man untouched and untarnished by Will's experiences in the Games. If he was alive, Will thought he'd be proud. Not relieved and wilfully ignorant to what had happened like his mother, or grateful and tactful like his sister, or slightly in awe like his classmates. His father would've been proud and forgiving.

He would've hated the house.

It was too big, really. Will's family was small, and so was Bev's. Yet they'd been given two separate, huge homes, that could fit a family of ten. This house felt just as empty as the old one, although not quite in the same way. Everywhere felt empty at the moment, the only sliver of home he'd managed to get was the brief few weeks he'd lived in the cabin after the

Games, before they officially moved to the Victors' Village. That had been real. But then it had slipped away.

Will hadn't felt a sense of belonging in a long time.

He felt empty, sometimes. When he wasn't around anybody- excluding the times he woke up panting from nightmares, terrified- things were kind of numb. He supposed that maybe, deep down, he was waiting for Hannibal to come in and save him again. Because that was what Hannibal *did*, right? He *saved* Will. Over and over again, he would be there, at his rescue, always. It was something he'd started to take for granted, but now he no longer had it, he missed it desperately. He didn't quite *need* it the way he used to, the way he had in the Games, but that didn't mean he didn't want it, didn't crave it late at night, curled up alone in his bed. He didn't need Hannibal to save him from any real, corporeal danger, but he *wanted* to be saved nonetheless. From *this*. From monotony. From emptiness.

Hannibal had made him so happy and fond and fierce. Yes, he had done terrible things, and it had made Will feel angry and betrayed. But at least he'd been *feeling*. What he wouldn't give, to get that again. To get the heady rush of mixed emotions he always got around Hannibal, to get goosebumps and butterflies again, as he stared into a familiar pair of dark eyes.

Even thinking of Hannibal… he missed him so much it *ached*.

That made him feel.

Being around Bev helped a little. She'd been there too. But it wasn't the *same*. Neither one of them understood the other's experience, not *really*. They had an idea, and she understood better than most people. But only Hannibal could really comprehend. He'd *been* there, he'd experienced it too, and while Will was under no delusions that it had affected Hannibal as much as it had affected him, he still had someone out there with some comprehension of what he'd been through. He'd had to go months without him, though, and Beverly was one of the only real, mildly successful cures he had for the urge to lose himself in his head completely.

They would still go down to the river. Still listen to the fishermen go about their daily business. Still sit on the bank for *hours*, from dawn till dusk, losing track of time like they always had. But now, much more of their time together was spent in silence, and they would no longer dream of a life away from District 4. They'd seen what the outside world had to offer, and they hadn't liked it very much. The silence persisted between them. There was a lot to say. There was a lot that *could* be said. But it wasn't. It was *easier* to talk about boring, mind-numbingly ordinary things like school or mothers or the weather, rather than dredge up trauma and pain, stuff that would be brought up all over again on the Victory Tour anyway. Perhaps it wasn't healthy to ignore it all, but how *could* he be expected to be healthy after everything?

“The Victory Tour is in a week,” Bev stated once Will had made his way back from the river with Abigail. She was laying flat on the bed, gaze on the ceiling. Her necklace rested upon her chest, the chrysanthemum rising and falling with her breaths. Will didn't remember the last time he'd seen her so still, her only movements due to respiration.

“Yeah.”

“We're gonna have to see all those families.” It was a horrified whisper. Will could tell her mind was lingering on District 5. She had killed the girl from there, in a fit of panic and fear. But… that had happened before in the history of the Games. Families didn't usually blame the victor- they couldn't, really, in case they made a scene and were punished for it. But they were rarely outwardly angry. Upset, maybe, but most didn't hate the victor. They hated the Capitol. While Bev's concerns were rational, they likely wouldn't result in any real, detrimental consequences.

Will's, on the other hand…

He was frightened beyond belief. Buddish's District and family were the least of his worries, because he hadn't just accidentally killed someone. He'd done many more unspeakable things. District 10 and 11 would be where he would have to stand up in front of the family and friends of both Tier and Stammets, and act as if he hadn't gone too far while murdering them. Act like he wasn't glad they were dead. Like he hadn't enjoyed watching them splutter and die. He could scarcely imagine the pain in their mothers' eyes, the pain that was always in the eyes of parents who were forced to stand and watch their children's killers preach about the regime that had put their children in line for death in the first place.

He had been so very brutal, and that made it even harder. The families of tributes that had died violently were always more obviously traumatised than the others.

Then, of course, there was Brown. He'd have to face his District. Will wasn't quite sure what to expect, or how he'd feel, but he knew it would just bring it up all over again. He was *fine* with putting it in the past and pretending like it hadn't happened, like he didn't wake up in tears every other night, Brown's hands on him, like he wasn't haunted by the memory on stormy nights. He just wanted to leave it.

The Capitol would never let him.

“Freddie and Jack will be there,” he said, in lieu of comfort. “They'll help us get through it.”

“And Hannibal will be there,” she added, with a meaningful look in his direction. He regretted telling her about the kiss.

“You aren't wrong,” he replied nonchalantly.

It wasn't like he cared *that* much. *It's not like I'm in love with him or anything,* he thought, exiting the Victors' Village an hour or so later, *I don't want him that way.* Hannibal was beautiful, and that wasn't news to Will. But he was just a friend. It *irked* him, the comments he'd get from Beverly and Abigail, and the looks they'd share if he was brought up in conversation. He *knew* what they thought. But it *wasn't like that.* Besides, he had other things on his mind. Other people on his mind.

He *couldn't* want Hannibal like that.

“Hi,” he whispered breathlessly, once he finally reached the tiny cabin on the outskirts of the District, and the door swung open.

Molly smiled, and he stepped forward to kiss her.

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Sometimes I wish I could drown in the sky.”

“Why?”

“Because it's kinder than the sea.”

“What's so bad about the sea?”

“It's so cold. It's so alien.”

“The sky isn't alien?”

“The sky doesn't ruin my hair.”

That made him laugh. He reached out to touch it, pulling a golden-brown strand between his fingers, staring as the moonlight caught it, making it seem translucent. She was so pretty. Sometimes he felt as if he could drown in *her*.

“I like the sea,” he said softly.

“Really? Even after...” She trailed off, awkward and apologetic. He simply gazed at her, imploring. “Even after it killed your dad,” she added quietly. It wasn't a question.

“It wasn't the sea that killed my dad,” he murmured. “It was the storm.”

“Storms scare me.”

“I know.” He paused for a beat. “A lot of things scare me.”

“Does next week scare you?” she asked.

“I don't want to go,” he whispered.

“Then don't. Stay here with me. I'll hide you under my bed.”

He grinned, pressing his forehead against her shoulder, smelling the sweet perfume of her skin. She smelt of dirt, sweat and sea-salt. She smelt of District 4. She smelt of home. He could feel grass and hair tickling him, but he couldn't bring himself to move away from her. They were laying in the long, thick greenery of the woods, and she was on her back, staring up at the sky.

Molly loved the sky.

It was the first thing she'd said to him when he'd approached her at school, recognising her from a lifetime ago. Recognising her from one of his last goodbyes, sat on a red velvet sofa that haunted his dreams. She'd been staring out of the window at the clouds. The day had been dreary and grey, but she'd told him she thought it was beautiful anyway.

“Grey doesn't have to mean dull,” she'd said. “Look how many shades there are. It goes on *forever*.”

She'd sounded dreamy and whimsical, and Will had only been home for two months at the time. He'd *needed* dreamy and whimsical. He'd needed someone who managed to see beauty in grey skies, and in his case, one incredibly damaged teenage boy. In the Games, he'd been hit too hard by the harsh reality of the world and all the terrible things in it. All the terrible things that human beings could do to each other. He wanted to dream of the sky for once, of blue endlessness and sunsets, rather than the crimson sting of blood. He'd *wanted*. It was consuming but it was refreshing. He hadn't wanted much for *months*. He hadn't really felt much at all. She hadn't changed his dreams, but she had helped, in her own way.

And he couldn't help but agree with her, on some level. He hadn't seen the natural sky in what felt like forever. Even at its most drab, it really was beautiful.

“I don't think President Verger would be happy to find me hiding under my girlfriend's bed.”

“He was a teenager once too!”

“Gross.”

He couldn't see her face, but he knew she was smiling. He liked making her smile.

“I'll miss you,” she uttered, tone sad.

“I'll miss you too.”

“At least you'll get to see Hannibal again,” she replied, and he froze. He'd mentioned him to her of course, but he was rarely brought up in conversation. “Are you looking forward to it?”

“I guess.”

“Haven't you missed him?”

“I guess,” he repeated. It felt… odd. Like he was involving two things together that really shouldn't touch. Molly and Hannibal were from different worlds, and belonged in different parts of his brain. Hearing Hannibal's name from her lips was disconcerting.

“Are you going to kiss him?”

“*What?”* He shot up from his position, moving from laying to sitting in an instant, head spinning from the suddenness of it. He had never told her about what had transpired in that corridor, before Hannibal left the Training Center. He had never confessed how he'd been kissed for practice, kissed for their future, and wished he'd been kissed for love.

“For the Capitol?” she prompted, and he stared at her blankly, still reeling from her previous question. She sighed, sitting up as well, hands going to her hair to check for grass strands. “You know, the whole fake love story thing. Do you think you'd have to kiss?”

“Here,” he muttered, pulling a green tendril from behind her ear. He took a deep breath, calming himself. She didn't know. It was okay. “I don't know. I don't know when they're officially making us a couple. It might not be until after the Victory Tour, but we might have to kiss next week, yeah. Will that… bother you?”

“Of course it'll bother me,” she admitted. “But I understand that you have to. I understand it's to protect your family. I'd just… prefer to know in advance. If and when it'll happen.”

“There's no 'if' about it, I'm afraid. It'll happen. I just don't know when.”

“I would like to meet him, you know.” The light of the moon, filtered through the foliage, made her look ethereal. It caught on her eyelashes as she moved her eyes up to meet his. “Considering you'll have to spend the rest of your life with him. I'd like to know you're in good hands.”

“I don't think that's wise,” he said brusquely. “You might not be able to, anyway.”

She looked perturbed at his irritable reaction, but otherwise didn't comment. She knew when not to press, and he was glad she didn't. He wasn't ready to confront all the emotions he felt at the thought of them meeting, let alone speak them aloud. She changed the subject, and it was forgotten.

They slept out there, that night. He struggled sleeping inside sometimes, the mattress and pillows were too soft, the blanket too warm, and when he woke he'd be disoriented not to feel the brush of open air on his skin. It had been hardest those first few months, but now he usually settled for just sleeping with the window wide open. However, on nights like these, when the moon was especially bright and the temperature not too cold, he'd make the trek to Molly's little cabin and they'd sleep outside. She told him she'd make the compromise because she liked her last sight before falling asleep to be of the stars. She was good like that.

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Dawn's grey light was only just beginning to creep over the horizon when he made it back to the Victors' Village. He had departed early, leaving Molly with a lingering kiss and loving smile. They hadn't slept all that much. He didn't really sleep, these days. He'd fall asleep late and wake up early; he was constantly exhausted, but he'd got fairly used to it now. Sleeping next to Molly helped a little, gave him an extra hour or so, and he knew it couldn't be due to just a warm body beside his. Since he'd returned, he'd slept next to Bev, he'd slept next to Abigail, but neither helped in the way Molly did. Perhaps it was because she was someone new. Perhaps he needed that- a new, grounding presence in his life, to help him adjust to how much everything had changed.

Perhaps.

Stepping into the Victor's Village, he knew immediately that something was wrong. There was something in the air. Something crisp, and tense. It put him on edge in an instant, and he couldn't quite bring himself to move. Just hung back by the gate for a good ten minutes, panic coursing through his veins. He was probably being ridiculous, but he liked to believe that the Games had helped hone his senses a little. And his senses told him something was amiss. The Village felt too *quiet*. It wasn't often *this* quiet. Multiple Victors and their families lived here, occupying nine out of the twelve houses the Village contained, and while it was typically serene, likely because most Victors wanted to be left alone after the Games, it was *never* this silent. Will didn't really know most of them, nor did he want to, but the area was always quite obviously populated. The evidence of life could be seen: the footprints in the mud or snow, depending on the weather, the bustle of interaction from the houses, the fishing rods propped up against the fences. The rods were still there, and there seemed to be footprints. But the bustle was gone.

It was too quiet.

He moved towards the houses, and saw why.

Crowded around the door to Bev's house, were a few people decked out in smart clothes and bright colours. It was obvious where they were from. And seeing the lack of extravagance they carried, it was obvious they weren't a part of Bev's prep team. Which could only really mean one thing. He watched in motionless horror as President Verger emerged from between them, a suspicious spring in his step and smirk plastered on his face. It only grew wider when he spotted Will.

“Well, well, Mr Graham. Out for a walk?”

“I was fishing,” he blurted out, chastising himself the second it passed his lips. What an *idiot*. He sincerely hoped Verger was clueless enough about fishing that he didn't notice the lack of equipment Will had with him.

“Catch anything good?”

“No,” he whispered.

Verger bounded down the steps, stopping when he came face to face with Will, who almost flinched back at the closeness of him. Almost. He forced himself not to move, to stay frozen, to not react to whatever Verger was about to do.

“Well I did,” came his reply. “I caught something very good *indeed*. Your friend Beverly really is much better when she does as she's told, don't you think?”

“If you hurt her-”

“I didn't touch a hair on her pretty little head, no need to worry.” He smiled. *He's a pig,* Will thought, and he really was. Everyone knew his fondness for swine, and most people would probably agree that he looked like one. His piggy nose, his pallid skin, the nasal quality of his voice. *You are what you eat*, Will supposed. “But I trust you'll do the same? You'll do as you're told, Mr Graham?”

“Yes,” he spat.

“Do you understand what you're being told to do?”

It hadn't been said, had remained unspoken, a message that passed without ears to listen in. The message had been spoken a long time ago. He had been told, after the Games. He would have to be in love with Hannibal, or be as convincing as possible when he pretended to be. It didn't need repeating, and they both knew exactly what Verger was talking about. This wasn't the order. This was the reminder.

“I do.”

“Good. Because if you don't… Well. I haven't met your sister yet. I'd be quite happy to pay her a visit.”

“Don't you *dare*.”

“Then do as you're told,” Verger snapped, light-hearted demeanour gone in a flash. His voice turned from grating and excitable to the sound of a whip cracking. “And *mean* it.”

His face turned again, shifting from its solemnity to that irritating joyfulness once more. With one last happy grin, he pushed past Will and strode away, his advisers following hot on his heels as he exited the Village. Will was barely aware as he climbed the step to Bev's house, ducking through the open door and finding her in the dining room. She glanced up at him as he entered, face fearful and eyes wide.

“What did he say to you?” Will asked, and it came out as a croak more than anything else.

“There could be beginnings of rebellion in the Districts. Apparently I need to help stop that.” Her voice was weak, faint. Her expression was painted in shock.

“*How?”*

“Do as I'm told. Praise the Capitol, I guess. Otherwise he'll hurt my mom. Or you. Or Abigail.”

“He wouldn't hurt me,” Will assured. “He has too many things planned for me and Hannibal.”

“I don't know. He still scares me,” she whispered. “He still *could*. If he wanted. If things don't go well on this tour...”

“It will. They will,” Will promised. He didn't know that for sure, of course. But they had to. Maybe if he said it enough it would come true. “But… a rebellion?”

“Not yet. But perhaps. He can't have that,” she said, voice monotone. It sounded like she was repeating what he'd said. “It's why he let us win the Games, I think. If I'd died it would've martyred me. He needs to show the Districts I'm just like the rest of the Capitol. It's why the Tour is so important.”

“We'll get through it. We just… need to do as we're told, I guess.”

And so it began. He could feel the control he had over his life slipping by the minute.

Chapter End Notes

i do like molly, as much of a hindrance to hannigram as she is. Hope you like the chapter <3

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The following week brought the passing of autumn into winter. Snow began to fall, the morning of the Victory Tour. He woke to a white world, a pure world. A thin layer of ice covered the ground, frosting the gravel and the grass like the top of a cake. It made him feel clearer, somehow. More awake. More *ready*. Perhaps it was a good thing- he had always preferred the cold, after all. Summer was stifling. Winter was liberating.

There wasn't enough liberation to go around, these days.

“How long will you be gone?” Abigail asked over breakfast, sorrow etching the lines of her face.

“A few weeks. Not that long,” he answered. “I'll be back before you know it.”

“At least I know you *will* be coming back this time,” she said. “Last time… I had no idea if you were coming home. If I'd ever see you again.”

He hadn't known either. He'd been almost certain, somewhere, in the back of his mind, that he wouldn't be coming home. He wouldn't be leaving the arena. He would never see Abigail again. But now, he was alive and healthy and *home*. Maybe he *should* be grateful. Verger letting them all out had been a kindness, technically. Will *did* owe him, however much he hated him. And he had to do what was necessary to keep surviving. If that meant capitalising on the Capitol's perspective of his and Hannibal's relationship, then he was more than willing to do it. It was a shame, though, really. A shame that the little time he'd get to spend with him was mostly going to be for publicity.

Within the hour he'd said goodbye to Abigail and his mother and been ushered over to Bev's so the prep teams could work on them together, and their lively animation was enough to ease his worrying, even if only slightly.

“What colour does Hannibal like best on you?” Brian queried, sorting through a rack of clothes. “Verger and Chilton want the reunion done on camera, so how he reacts is important.”

“I don't know?”

“Go with blue,” Bev interjected. “He likes blue on Will.” He frowned, shooting her a questioning look. She just smirked. “It matches your eyes,” was her answer.

“Right… how do you figure this?”

“Call it a woman's intuition.”

Beverly's claims were unsubstantiated, and probably false, likely just for Brian and the rest of the prep team. As far as Will knew, they thought he and Hannibal were actually in love. But honestly, what did what *Hannibal* liked matter? This wasn't about them, not really. It was about the Capitol and it was about the cameras. What mattered was what people thought when they watched them reunite. It made him a little sad, the eventuality that seeing Hannibal again wouldn't get to be private. It would've been nice, to get those first few minutes with just him. Just them, alone. Or at least, with no cameras or audience. That part, the reunion… he wanted it to be *real*. Not staged. Not for the Capitol. But then, *everything* belonged to the Capitol. His *life* belonged to the Capitol. And he had known since the beginning… his friendship with Hannibal belonged to the Capitol. He was a fool for getting his hopes up.

Waiting for the prep teams to finish was a sweet agony. On the one hand, he wasn't looking forward to the Victory Tour, nor was he excited for he and Hannibal's public reconnection. But he had never liked waiting all that much. It would be better to just get it over with, to start the Victory Tour as soon as possible so it could end as soon as possible, and he could come home. Back to his mother, back to Abigail.

Back to Molly.

He had seen her last night, and bid her a lingering farewell. He had seen her nearly everyday for the past few months; it would be odd to go so very long without being near her. Although it wasn't as if he hadn't had to adapt to that sort of situation before. He had spent every waking minute with Hannibal in the Games, and the sleeping ones too. He had been ripped away only a day after they'd got out. He could cope without Molly. He would have to.

“Keep your head up,” Freddie hissed to him as he and Bev met her and Jack at the Village entrance. “When you see Hannibal again, remember you're supposed to be in love. Convince everyone. Convince me. Convince the *President*.”

He could only nod. He didn't know what he was capable of saying at this point. Nerves had their tight grip on him, holding him quiet, barely able to move. The car that transported them to the train station was a blessing, he didn't think he would've been able to walk the distance without his body seizing up and rendering him motionless. It was crippling, the inevitability of seeing Hannibal. He hadn't imagined what it would actually be like until now. This was happening *now*. He was not prepared in the slightest.

The car pulled up at the station, and the barrier to the platform was already opened for them. His stomach lurched at the flash of cameras that beamed through the windows, and he sucked in a desperate breath.

Cold air hitting his face helped subside the nausea, but the sight of Hannibal brought it all rushing back.

Hannibal.

He looked exactly the same as Will remembered him, as Will saw him every night, invading his dreams. Some nights he was covered in blood: Boyle's blood, Brown's blood, Budge's blood. Some nights he was clean and healthy, and they were backstage before the interviews all over again, he was promising to be Will's ally and Will was so, so captivated. Some nights

he was clean but unhealthy. Will was wrapped in his one good arm and his one broken one and then he was being kissed and abandoned.

Now, he was here. Standing beside the train with his eyes fixed on the car. They were glued to Will as he emerged, and Will could swear he looked just as nervous as Will felt.

A corner of his mouth turned up, a tiny smile. Relief.

Exactly as Will remembered.

His seldom true smiles, the curve of his jaw, the purse of his lips. The way his hair fell perfectly across his forehead when it wasn't smoothed back, making him look younger, more innocent.

He was anything but innocent.

Will didn't care. There were things he blamed Hannibal for, things he hated him for, but the moment he saw him on the platform, he didn't *care*. It didn't seem to matter. *None* of it did. Because this was *Hannibal*: his ally, his friend, his betrothed.

His feet shifted without needing to be told, propelling him forward and launching him into Hannibal's waiting arms. He gasped brokenly at the sudden force of Will's body, but Will couldn't bring himself to feel guilty. Hannibal was soft and warm and Will loved him. His arms locked around his back, grasping at the fabric of his shirt, and his legs even half hooked themselves around Hannibal's, lifting him from the ground. His entire weight was resting on Hannibal, who held him for as long as he could before his knees buckled and they sank to the ground; together, entwined. Will didn't let go, immersing himself in Hannibal Lecter once more, burying his face into his neck. The warmth of his arms encased Will, and he had to do his best not to start weeping at the familiar feel of it. Hannibal smelt like nature, like flowers and petrichor and honeysuckle. He smelt like the arena, just less artificial.

Will never would've thought he could miss that smell.

He wished he could say this was for the cameras. Wished he could say that this emotional display was nothing but acting for the Capitol to eat up and enjoy.

But it wasn't. This was utterly real. He had missed Hannibal *desperately*, hadn't realised just *how* much he had missed him until he saw his expectant face by the train, saw his broad shoulders and perfectly styled hair. Everything about him was everything he had longed for. Will could barely believe this was actually happening, that Hannibal was real and solid and holding him. He could hear his heartbeat rocketing under his ear, and feel his hands clutching him just as tightly as Will's were.

Blind joy settled in his chest. He worried that if his heart swelled any bigger, it might explode.

He swallowed the sob threatening to crawl from his throat, blinked past the tears clouding his vision, and pulled back from the embrace, pressing his forehead against Hannibal's, eyes

tightly closed. He needed their first words spoken to each other, after all this time, to be theirs and theirs alone. They deserved to have this, a private greeting:

“I really have missed you,” he murmured.

It was nothing big or beautiful or life-changing. The words didn't mean much themselves, it was the gesture. The whisper. Hannibal would know he meant it, then. Hannibal would understand that Will wouldn't have been quiet if he'd wanted the reporters to overhear and spin some tail about their loving reunion. This had been for his ears alone. It was true.

Expecting words back was foolish, apparently. Will was surprised. Hannibal usually had an answer to everything, something to say about anything that came his way. Once he saw why, peeling open his eyes reluctantly, it only saved to make the rush of affection he had for Hannibal even stronger. His eyes were screwed shut, his breathing laboured. His face was creased in an expression that Will could only call fierce elation. He was overcome, speechless.

Inexplicably, Will wanted to kiss him.

Now would be the time, if there was any. The moment pulled taught between them, elastic stretching, moments from snapping. Hannibal swallowed and opened his eyes, drawing Will into their dark depths instantly.

He couldn't breathe. He didn't *want* to. If he breathed, the moment would be over. They were trapped, transfixed, and silent.

Hannibal's eyes flicked to his lips.

You truly are beautiful.

A camera flashed, and the elastic broke. Will hadn't realised he'd been deaf to the sounds of their excited chattering until he began to hear it again. They really had been in their own little world- grasping each other on the ground like smitten teenagers. Which was… perfect, actually. It hadn't been for the publicity, it had been completely honest, but the Capitol and the President would *love* it. If this were anything but exactly what the President wanted, if this wasn't going to help keep his family alive, he'd be embarrassed at the display. He was a fairly tactile person, but he wasn't fond of it being a public spectacle. Now, however, that worked to his advantage, and he just had to play up to it. So once Hannibal had risen to his feet and given him a hand up, he stepped to the side and averted his eyes like he really *was* embarrassed, waiting as Bev greeted Hannibal after throwing Will a knowing look. He felt someone step beside him.

“Good job,” Jack said, voice only audible to him. “They'll love it.”

The confirmation of it was all the reassurance he needed. This Tour would be fine. He just had to… do this, for the next few weeks. Yes, potentially it would be for *forever*, but that would come later. Getting through the Tour was first on the list, and dwelling on the future wouldn't help anybody. One step at a time.

“Will?” It was Hannibal. Beverly had disappeared inside the train, and Hannibal was holding a hand out, presumably to aid Will's step up from the platform. “Shall we go?”

He hadn't heard that voice in a long time. Smooth and accented, it was one of the few constant things he had had with him in the arena. He had even missed its pretentiousness. The grin inching its way onto his face wasn't for the cameras either- it was surprising how easy this was. All he had to do was see Hannibal or hear his voice and it all came naturally.

He reached out and let Hannibal pull him onto the train. Their hands fit together just as he'd imagined they would.

Chapter End Notes

i feel like this chapter is a bit short but i hope you enjoy! Hannibal's finally back!

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Dinner was a surprisingly quiet affair. There were a lot of them there, with multiple teams from multiple Districts being involved, which made the silence all the more tense. At first Will worried the train wouldn't be big enough to house all of them, but then again, it was a Capitol train. Of course it would be big enough- the Capitol thrived off materialism.

Being around Hannibal again wasn't at all like he'd thought. Back on the platform, in front of all those cameras, it had felt entirely natural. He'd expected them to slip back into the same old comforting routine, but now, surrounded by both friends and strangers alike, it felt stilted. Like they were trying too hard. They could barely look each other in the eyes without glancing away hurriedly, more awkward than they had ever been. Maybe it was the presence of everyone else. Will certainly *hoped* so, he wouldn't be able to stand it if the rest of the Tour was like this- if he was too nervous to even meet Hannibal's *gaze* then how would he possibly spend time with him?

More importantly, however, was the subject of the Tour. It had technically already begun, but they would make their first public appearance tomorrow. In District 12. He would have to watch Brown's family as they watched him act like he wasn't nearly raped by their son. He felt queasy at the thought of it.

“How are you feeling about tomorrow?” Alana asked him after dinner, voice gentle and expression a little sad.

“I'm fine,” he mumbled. “It's fine.”

“No it isn't,” she argued kindly. “We all know how hard this will be for you, Will, and we're here if you need to talk. Tomorrow, just... try not to look at them.”

Them. Did she mean Brown's family, or the crowd in general? Did she mean the Capitol officials, waiting on the sidelines, preparing to notify Verger the minute he messed up? There wasn't all that much room for interpretation, but he was over-thinking it, so she could really mean anything. He didn't *want* to know. He'd do as much as possible to put off tomorrow, to put off even *thinking* about it, really. He willed himself to focus on something else as he retired to bed, alone with his thoughts, brain jumping from anything as little as fishing and school to bigger things like Hannibal and Molly.

Molly… who he hadn't even thought about since they boarded the train. He had almost *kissed* Hannibal. He had *wanted* to. And Molly hadn't even crossed his mind. The wave of guilt that hit him was paralysing; he hadn't told her about what had occurred between him and Hannibal in that corridor and he hadn't been planning to. But now, he felt as if he had to. It was the right thing to do, after all. They were in a *relationship*, and while he wasn't exactly lying to her, omission wasn't all that much better… and other things had happened, now. Things such as feeling the urge to kiss one person while he was dating another. It was one

thing to kiss Hannibal for the cameras, and Molly had allowed him that. But *wanting* to? Out of personal curiosity and desire? That was *wrong*.

Darkness was a warm relief in the room as he finally gave up on sleep and rose from the bed. He didn't think he could glance at himself in the mirror, knowing what he had wanted to do, and knowing what he was going to do now. He had expected Bev to join him, after a little while. But it had been nearly an hour and she still wasn't here, which meant she was either asleep, or she expected him to go to Hannibal. Which he would. Which he couldn't stop himself from doing. Because going to Hannibal, laying in his arms once more, hearing his voice when it was just for *him*, would make everything okay again.

It didn't take long to find him.

One of the doors, at the very end of the train corridor, was ajar. Light flooded out in a misshapen triangle on the soft carpet of the corridor, and Will knew. It was Hannibal's invitation.

So he crept forward, feet not making a sound, breathing almost completely ceased. Peering into the room, he saw Hannibal sitting in his bed, staring at the bump of his knees under the duvet, a frown plastered onto his face. Waiting for Will, evidently. He must've been waiting a while.

“Hannibal,” he tried, mouth forming a name he hadn't spoken aloud in *months*. It wasn't as if he hadn't mentioned him to anyone back home, but after a while, he'd preferred not to. It made him think of how much he yearned for him. Hannibal's head shot up at the sound of his name, and his expression visibly softened, frown retracting. “I'm...”

“Will,” he whispered, rapt.

Will went to him. Simply nestled himself in Hannibal's arms in a way that was so alike to that first night after they'd left Games, and felt all the stress and tension he'd been carrying dissolve into dazzling bliss. Except now, unlike that night, Hannibal had both working arms. Now, they hadn't seen each other for *months*, leaving Will to do nothing but sigh in relief at the contact he had so sorely missed. Whatever version of Hannibal he was with, be it the brutal and protective Hannibal in the Games, the vulnerable and affectionate Hannibal after the Games, or the Hannibal now that he hadn't quite gauged, this would always remain. He would always fit right into Hannibal's arms like a second skin.

It felt like coming home.

It really did. It reminded him of taking that first breath of District 4 air all those months ago, like the first breath after a long period of suffocation, like salvation and finality and new beginnings, all at once.

“My bed has felt so empty these past months without you,” Hannibal murmured into his hair. “I have felt your lack of presence every night since the Games. I missed you more deeply than you can begin to imagine.”

“I can imagine,” he replied, voice muffled by Hannibal's neck. “Trust me, I can.”

He felt Hannibal inhaling deeply, nose buried in his curls, and smiled against Hannibal's throat, sated. This was different to the hug on the platform. That had been spontaneous, a materialisation of the burst of wild sentiment he'd experienced on the sight of Hannibal. This felt *rehearsed,* he was so damn familiar with it. He'd been dreaming of it for ages, after all.

“How have you been?”

“Fine, I guess.”

“Will,” Hannibal warned. “It's me.”

“Okay, *not* fine, then,” he offered, half-sarcastic, and was rewarded with a huffed laugh from above him. “It's been… tough,” he settled on.

“Tough?” Hannibal probed, gentle.

Will could only pause, searching for the words. There were so many things he could say: nightmares every other night, near-constant hyper-vigilance, an aversion to open spaces. The first clearing he'd come across in the District 4 woods had given him his worst panic attack yet, unable to breathe under the crushing memories of Brown.

“Do you get them too?” he asked softly, the discomfort in his voice palpable. Hannibal hummed inquisitively, prompting Will to elaborate. “The nightmares.”

He felt Hannibal tense, breath catching. “Sometimes,” he answered. For a moment Will thought he'd finished speaking- the uneasy pause between his words was so long he might as well have. “I have trouble sleeping as it is.”

“We're so messed up.”

“Can you blame us?”

Will smiled. It was one of those smiles that he only had for Hannibal, and he hadn't even realised there was a difference until now. But this smile was warmer, more tender. Will had never really been a warm person. Perhaps Hannibal brought that out in him.

He certainly *felt* warm, drifting off to sleep in the sure embrace of Hannibal's arms.

Warm was different. Warm was *new*.

He liked it.

***

Waking up next to Hannibal was a beautiful surprise. The morning before he'd gone home, all those months ago, there had barely been words to describe the rush of emotions he'd felt at seeing Hannibal in the bed next to him, feeling his comforting presence beside him, in a *real* bed, like they were a *real* couple. It had been daunting and hopeful and true, and a million other things he couldn't name even if he tried.

Now, he was on his side, cushioned in Hannibal's arms, his back pressed against Hannibal's front. They must've shifted in the night. It wasn't unusual, really, they had woken up in this position a few times during the Games, and it wasn't all that odd once played off. They'd had more important things to worry about. They could've died later that very day. Waking up entangled in each other hadn't really been the main thing on their minds.

It was different, this time. More intimate. Hannibal seemed *closer*; it seemed more practised, more *intended*. Will was literally trapped in Hannibal's arms, completely unable to move; they were locked around him, pulling him tight against his chest. Will was amazed he could even *breathe*, considering the firmness of their grip.

And then there was… oh.

He couldn't be sure, of course. But when they were pressed together that snugly, there was room for some unthinkable conclusions to be made. It was impossible, really, that it was what Will thought it was. Hannibal wasn't *like* that. He rarely showed any display of vulnerability, and when he did, it was a *choice*. Something he *allowed* Will to see. This was involuntary, and therefore completely out of character for Hannibal. Because Hannibal didn't *do* involuntary. He was controlled and composed and he always had everything under control. He *always* had a solution, even if that solution was to fight.

Will was the one being ridiculous. Hannibal didn't do involuntary and he *didn't like men,* despite his body suggesting differently. And then there was the return of the tight prison of his arms, restricting Will's movement, so that when he attempted to escape and forget anything had ever happened, he was prevented. But that wasn't even the worst part. Worse than the agonising embarrassment of the situation, worse than Will's inability to leave, was the stirrings of arousal he felt at the thought of it. The thought of Hannibal, aroused, for him. The thought that he had some kind of power over Hannibal, however small and insignificant that power may be. Control. Everybody desired it. Especially over people who seamlessly and constantly had it themselves.

“Will?”

His voice was low and sleep-roughened, and yet another surge of debilitating shame came over Will at the way his arousal spiked. This was likely an accidental and natural occurrence that he was blowing up into something it wasn't, head spinning tales about power and control, things that didn't even *apply* here.

“Morning,” he replied, voice tense, laying still in Hannibal's arms, waiting for him to realise.

Hannibal's arms snapped back from their hold on him so immediately and forcefully that Will was almost *thrown* away. Everything was silent and stationary for a few moments that felt like *years*. If someone moved, spoke, or even *breathed*, it would make it all the more real. But Will had to do *something*, the strained hush in the room was utterly excruciating. He moved to sit on the edge of the bed, hearing the sheets shifting as he went, noisier than anything he could've imagined. He could only look sheepish as he turned to glance at Hannibal, who looked *mortified*.

“Will...”

“It's okay,” Will rushed out, if only to abate his obvious humiliation. Will had never *seen* him like this, cheeks tinted pink and eyes wide, disbelieving. Whether he was shocked at himself or the situation, Will didn't know. He couldn't bring himself to ask. “We can forget it.”

“I'm sorry,” Hannibal whispered, horrified eyes meeting Will's awkward ones.

“It's fine. We should, um. Go to breakfast.”

“You go ahead. I'll… catch up.”

Hannibal had the blanket over him, knees tenting it. His reasoning for wanting to catch up was painfully obvious to the both of them, and Will could do nothing to stop the grimace flooding onto his face. It wasn't like he was *disgusted*, but it was just so… *awkward*. This wasn't *like* them. Things were always simple.

Not anymore, clearly.

He didn't think he'd ever left a room so fast in his life.

“Are you okay?” Bev asked at breakfast, watching as he wolfed down food.

“Yeah,” he mumbled, eyes trained on the plate as the door to the compartment opened again. If it was Hannibal, he couldn't bear to look. Things had been horrifically embarrassing earlier, and he wasn't ready to relive it this soon.

He knew he would have to *eventually*- they weren't that far from District 12, and the Victory Tour would be beginning in a few short hours. The Victory Tour. In all the humiliation he had barely *thought* about it, but he would have to face Brown's family today. He, Bev and Hannibal would have to talk about Brown, while everyone present would know full well what he had done and what Will was thinking of as he preached the Capitol rhetoric. This would be the worst District of them all, besides maybe Tier's. He would need all the support he could get.

Bev must've seen it in his face as his gaze drifted to the window, dread encompassing him.

“It'll be fine,” she said, hand reaching over to rest on his.

He'd heard a lot of that lately. 'Fine'. Some of it had been from *himself*. But really, he knew the awful and conclusive truth: it wouldn't be fine. It hadn't been fine since the moment he *volunteered*.

Perhaps he thought if he said it enough, it might come true.

Chapter End Notes

and so the slow burn/sexual tension escalates!

happy halloween :)

Chapter 5

At the sight of industrial buildings rising in the distance, Will excused himself from his prep team to throw up as quietly as possible in one of the bathrooms. The make-up they'd put him in felt stuck to his face, suffocating, a powdery mask of shallowness. Maybe it would help him get more into character, help him pretend to be that charming lovestruck victor that he had once played so very well for the Capitol. But now, after vomiting and experiencing the worst nerves he'd felt since the Games, he wasn't quite sure it would do the job. It would take a miracle to stop him from feeling so utterly weak and helpless. He didn't feel ready to step out on that stage at *all*, let alone keep up a friendly persona and act in love with Hannibal.

The Victory Tour as a whole was simply a crude display of dominance that alienated everyone involved, and Will wasn't looking forward to a second of it. It was just the Capitol needing to rub the fact that they were in control in the faces of the families who'd lost children to the Games. It was sickening, and lacked all pretence of subtlety. Not that the Capitol had ever been good at subtlety.

Glancing in the mirror, seeing his sickly pallor and dark circles, he realised how everyone would see him. The poor, damaged victor. Scared and sick because of Matthew Brown.

He was so *done* with everybody pitying him. He was done with this Tour before it had even started.

“Will?” It was Bev, her voice echoing from just outside the door. “Are you ready to leave?”

“I'll be out in a minute.”

His voice was hoarse, wrecked, from both the crippling fear and the retching. Everybody would be able to tell something was wrong- it sounded like he'd been *crying*. It was just a bonus to what was shaping up to be an absolutely *fantastic* day.

Despite the tension between him and Hannibal being obvious to everyone there, Will stuck close to him and didn't make eye contact as they were lead from the train to the Justice Building by the Peacekeepers. He needed Hannibal by his side for this, needed his ability to always have something to say and his constant calming presence. Plus, it would look good to the public if they seemed inseparable. Hannibal was understandably on edge, and didn't have anything to say to Will for perhaps the first time *ever*. It wasn't until right before they went on stage that he brushed a hand against Hannibal's, reassuring. They had to get through this.

“Hannibal,” he murmured, turning to him, and Hannibal only kept his eyes downcast. He forced his voice to be as quiet as possible, not wanting Bev or any of the other people nearby to overhear. “*Please* can we move past earlier. I need you to look at me. I need you to talk to me.” Eyes finally creeping upwards, Hannibal sighed, nervousness and embarrassment etched into his expression. “I *need* you.”

“I'm sorry. About everything. I need you too,” he whispered in return, a small victory, causing Will to smile involuntarily. Hannibal's mouth curved too, only a little, but it was

enough. He enveloped Will into his arms, the way he always did, the way that was unique to just *them*. Will felt his lips press briefly against his forehead, and shut his eyes against the rush of familiar affection he got only in moments like this, shared between them. Their own private little form of friendship.

And then the doors were opening, and they were pulling away from each other. Time to face what he'd been dreading.

His eyes found Brown's family in an instant. Eva's were a group of small, unruly boys that he recognised from her reaping, and an old woman who was attempting to clutch on to all of them, like her touch alone would be comfort enough on this horrible day. *My brothers are all watching,* Eva had pleaded, mere seconds before her death, as if that justification might prevent Brown from doing what he wished with her. Will had pitied her. She'd seemed nice enough.

But Brown's side… it was nearly empty. Two solitary figures stood there, not touching, faces incomprehensible from this distance. One of them was clearly his father, with the same dark hair and the same tired eyes. The other was a girl, about their age, who Will assumed to be his sister at first. But looking closer, her eyes were lighter, her hair more a chesnut-brown than Brown's duller brunette. It was certainly believable that it was just a matter of a few genetic differences, but the mixture of unbridled shame and hatred in her expression confirmed Will's second hypothesis. She hadn't been Brown's sister.

She'd been his girlfriend.

“Eva was there when nobody else was,” Bev was saying, a sweet tribute to a girl Will hadn't really met. “She was kind to me, and a good ally. She didn't deserve to die.” She paused, before adding, “and not in such a horrible way.”

Silence only met that statement. Of course, it had occurred in the history of the Games that people from the same District had killed each other. Those ceremonies always seemed tenser, and for good reason. But this was… something else. Brown hadn't just *killed* Eva. He had befriended her under false pretences, allied with her for days, before nearly raping her and then killing her without a second thought when somebody else came along. It was incomparably vile. Her poor family.

The unease of the silence was only made worse when there was a collective realisation that something had to be said about Brown. It wasn't as if they could just leave him out, and pretend like he wasn't a tribute in the Games. But they couldn't pretend like he wasn't an attempted rapist, either. Bev seemed at a loss for words, and Hannibal was equally stony-faced. Nobody was going to say anything. Will hated Brown. He hated him more than he'd ever hated anybody. But…

Abigail.

If they didn't help quell the possibilities of rebellion, then Verger would 'pay his sister a visit', as he had phrased it. That could mean any number of things, and Will didn't like the idea of any of them. Rebellion probably wouldn't rise from such a tiny incident like not mentioning a

tribute, but if things didn't go exactly the way Verger wanted, he could still punish them. The Districts would notice. He couldn't risk it.

“Brown was a very… *driven* person,” he found himself saying all of a sudden, and almost laughed at the absurdity of it, feeling all eyes fall to him.That was one way to put it, he supposed. “He knew what he wanted. May he rest in peace.”

Nobody applauded. Everybody seemed far too shocked. Especially the family, who were frowning up at him like he'd completely lost his mind. The girlfriend's expression had changed, shifted from loathing and disgust- whether at him or Brown, Will didn't know, and hadn't figured it out- to utter astonishment. It would've been one thing for Bev or Hannibal, his supposed love interests, to make a kind remark in Brown's memory. But for him, Brown's would-be victim, it was stunning. His voice echoed throughout the District 12 square for what felt like minutes on end, as they stared up at him from the mismatched and uncomfortable crowd.

The stilted halt in the ceremony was eventually and mercifully ended by the mayor gathering himself together and working past his surprise to present them with plaques, signifying the close of the ceremony. It was a blessing to have it end, but Will could only worry he'd made things worse. What if Verger saw, and assumed he'd said it to be contrary? To endear himself to the public even more, and come across as a kind and forgiving person? Saying something had made it run less smoothly than if he *hadn't* said anything.

Hannibal's hand was tight on his wrist as they were escorted off stage. Will could feel his fingernails biting into his skin.

“What were you *thinking?*” he hissed once they'd been escorted to the mayor's house, cornering him in one of the private rooms. Beverly wasn't far behind.

“We had to-”

“We didn't *have* to do *anything*,” Hannibal snapped. “You shouldn't have done that. You didn't need to-”

He cut off, looking wild and distressed, hands clenched into fists at his sides. He swallowed, cleared his throat, like the words were stuck in there. Bev placed a hand on Hannibal's arm, soothing, and the tension in his body seemed to lessen as he exhaled. She had a knack for calming people down. It was a knack for inciting all sort of emotions in people, really- her charisma usually led the room, and if she wanted calm, she'd have it.

“We're sorry, Will,” she said, saddened. “It's our fault. One of us should've just stepped up, said something about him. It shouldn't have been you.”

“It's okay, honestly. It's over now.”

“It's not *okay*-”

“Hannibal,” Beverly warned, hand squeezing where it was on his arm, before turning back to Will. Hannibal looked shocked at the interruption, stunned silent, staring at her with an odd

look on his face. “I'm sorry, and so is Hannibal. What you did up there was so brave. I don't think I could've done it. After everything he did to you...”

“Let's not,” Will intervened sharply. “Let's not talk about it. Please.”

She nodded, and the conversation was finalised by Jack opening the door and motioning for her to follow him. Probably to coach her on tonight. He and Hannibal wouldn't have to do much, just look happy and besotted with one another, he supposed. He wanted to leave with Bev, desperate to escape the stifling smallness of the room, but Hannibal tugged on his arm, stilling him as he moved to go after them, reproach written all over his face. His mouth was half-open, unformed words resting on his tongue.

“I reacted poorly,” he uttered. “I apologise. Beverly made me realise… I shouldn't have spoken to you like that.”

“Why were you so angry?”

“Isn't it obvious?”

“No?”

“What Brown did to you,” he began, fury casting a dark shadow across his expression as he thought of it, “it was despicable. Wretched and crass. I've never been so… *affected*. Not by anything. So I can't imagine what it must be like for you.” His voice had gone soft when he started speaking of Will, and his eyes were tender as they gazed at each other. “To hear you speak about him like that. Because you thought you had to. I was angry at myself for not doing it. Beverly was right. It should've been one of us. Not you. Never you.”

“President Verger visited us,” he admitted, and watched Hannibal's surprise. He liked Hannibal's emotions, always brief and unreadable, tiny birds that flitted across his usually unmoving expression. “He told us we had to do as we're told. He threatened to hurt Abigail.”

“He said that?”

“He heavily implied it,” he corrected. “Believe me, I didn't enjoy talking about Brown. But it felt necessary. If the Tour doesn't run exactly the way Verger wants it to, then our families are in danger, so I can't risk it. At all. That was hard for me, but I think that's what he wants. He wants me to suffer.”

“It's over, now,” Hannibal said softly. “You won't have to do that again. Not for Brown. But… why did Verger visit you and not me?”

“You're smart, Hannibal. I guess he knew that you'd know what to do. Me and Bev needed reminding.”

“Perhaps,” he allowed, frowning. Will knew he'd still be pondering it for a while, and shook his head at Hannibal's obsessiveness. “About Brown… I know you don't like talking about it. But if you ever need to speak to someone-”

“Don't.” He gritted his teeth, feeling the faint beginnings of panic stirring in his chest. “I can't. You know that.”

“I think you may be in denial, Will. It isn't healthy.”

“I'm not in *denial*. I know what happened to me. I just prefer not to talk about it, is all.”

“Well, I'm here if you change your mind. Bedelia is too- she's a doctor, you know. Deals with that sort of thing all the time.”

“I don't really know her.”

“Maybe that's better.”

It was a reasonable point. But Will *couldn't*. He was barely able to think of Brown, before it all came rushing back like it was yesterday, forcing him to see bared teeth and feel wet grass whenever he shut his eyes. He couldn't cope, if he thought about it. *Especially* if he talked about it. It made it too real. Even talking about it *now* would ruin him for the rest of the day, make him seem distant or stressed or bored; he could never escape his head once Brown came worming his way back in.

So he let Hannibal take this one. Let him lead the niceties and answer all the questions from the mayor and the other people at the dinner, held his hand under the table and relied on the sharp press of his fingers when Will was too far away, too obvious. It wasn't until they were ushered away to their rooms and Hannibal was smoothing back his hair as they drifted off to sleep, that he let the tears fall.

Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

District 11 and 10 were much the same as 12, if not worse. It wasn't until now, out of the panic-ridden stupor he'd been lost in before, that he realised just how poor and run-down these outer Districts were. The film footage of their reapings were taken in the square, usually the most presentable place there. Even they had always seemed fairly derelict. Honestly, it didn't do them justice. Perhaps his whining about being poor was unfair- he hadn't been aware just how lucky he'd had it. It was hard to get by, sometimes, but District 4 was pretty and small and they were more or less free.

Not that Districts could ever be free.

But they were far better off than here.

Speaking about Stammets was nowhere near as hard as speaking about Brown. Brown had been an unwanted memory, a nuisance. Something that only caused Will stress and pain. But his murder of Stammets felt… reasonable. Justified, somehow. Stammets *had* been trying to kill him, and Will hadn't gone overboard- he'd just quickly and swiftly dealt with the problem. It felt a little awkward, sure. His family seemed saddened and Will felt a little guilty, but this happened all the *time* on the Victory Tour, a victor was likely to have killed at least one or two of the other tributes and they always got through it with either a slight grimace or proud smile. Will wasn't *proud* of what he'd done, but it had been necessary to his survival. He hadn't gone too far, not like he had with Tier.

Because with Tier, he had lost control entirely. That sort of killing wasn't rare, not in the Games, but it was still *uncomfortable*. Will wasn't *like* that, he wasn't trained to be numb to death, he wasn't trained to kill in the same way that most victors were. Beating Tier into a bloody pulp, watching as his knuckles began to ooze with his blood… it wasn't something he was used to. So understandably, he wasn't used to dealing with repercussions for that sort of thing. He could only try not to look as they were guided on stage in 10, could only keep quiet and not raise his head as Hannibal spoke of the brief few days he'd spent with Tier as his ally. He didn't bring up his death, nor the request to kill Will. Thankfully.

“The worst is over now, I suppose,” Hannibal remarked the day after, as they sped away on the train to District 9. “Brown. Stammets. Tier.”

He was on his knees on the compartment floor, refolding the clothes from the bottom drawer, positioned between Will's legs. Will had laughed at him at first, until Hannibal began pouting and insisting that the maid had 'done it wrong', and Will had felt a little bad, though still amused. Just another one of his eccentricities, presumably. He looked slightly adorable when he pouted, too.

“The worst of the Victory Tour, yeah. But then what?” he asked from where he was perched on the edge of the bed, eyes fixed on the methodical moving of Hannibal's hands as he folded

the clothes. “We go home and get married?”

“It's not so bad,” Hannibal said, hesitant. “It's better than dying.”

“It's just… not how I envisioned my life, is all. All planned out like this.”

“How *did* you envision your life?”

“I don't know,” Will replied. “I'd get out on the sea, maybe. Probably marry eventually.”

“At least now you have some excitement,” Hannibal argued, but it was wry. He didn't mean it like that, of course. But they would do best to find any silver lining they could. “Perhaps we'll find a way out of it. Verger can't live forever.”

There was something dark behind those words. Will knew it was absurd, knew that Hannibal would never be able to reach Verger to murder him, but it felt like a threat. He forgot, sometimes, just how ruthless and violent Hannibal really was. This was a boy who had already murdered multiple people before the Games, someone who had murdered even more within the Games, without remorse or regret. And yet all Will saw most of the times were soft eyes and sweet smiles. He truly had perfected his mask. His person suit.

“I doubt he'll die before we're forced into marriage, he's not *that* old. Do you have any idea when they're actually confirming it?”

“They haven't even confirmed our relationship yet, let alone our *marriage*. I think we're in this for the long haul.”

It came with a little sigh, and Will felt a burst of inexplicable tenderness. He would be spending the rest of his life with this boy, and while he wasn't too happy with his lack of choice, Hannibal was right- it could be worse. They could be *dead*. They were lucky to be alive, and Will would take anything he could get. He lifted his hand from where it rested on the bed, bringing it down to capture Hannibal's cheek in his palm. Hannibal's eyes fluttered shut and he ceased all activity at the contact, leaning into it, looking half-drunk, dazed. Will brushed a thumb along the curve of his jaw, hearing his breath catch in his throat. He finally glanced up, pupils blown wide, eyes darker than ever.

“Well, if I had to fake marry someone, it would be you,” Will joked, light-hearted but entirely truthful.

Hannibal mirrored his smile, but only slightly. His eyes were darting across Will's face, lightning-quick and desperate, like if he looked away Will would be gone, like this was the last time he'd see him. Every nerve in Will's body felt like it was singing, attuned to the high atmosphere of the moment and the razor-sharp emotion that clouded between them.

“And I, you,” Hannibal whispered, only causing the tension to increase. His hand came up to close over Will's, gentle and meaningful.

Will couldn't pinpoint his expression, but… that had been happening a lot, lately. It was that expression that always occurred during moments like these, when this *thing* between them

was at its height, bright and loud and impossible to ignore. Will couldn't pinpoint that *thing*, either, which was what made it all the more frustrating. He needed to *understand,* he was driven insane by his inability to read Hannibal as it was, but now… now he couldn't get to grips with him at *all*. What did it *mean* when his eyes got glassy, filled with some delicate unnameable emotion that threatened to overspill? Or when his face smoothed out, forcing his mouth half-open and his breathing tremulous? He was a mystery, as he had always been, if not even more so. Will couldn't deny that was half of the attraction.

Because he *was* attracted to Hannibal, as much as he longed to deny it, as much as he wished it wasn't true, and whether that was to save Molly from the humiliation and heartbreak or protect himself from the inevitable rejection, he didn't know. Perhaps it was a bit of both. Hannibal was the biggest puzzle Will had ever met, so he was naturally drawn to him, before the tanned skin and piercing eyes even came into it. Hannibal's features were appealing and he always kept Will guessing. He couldn't exactly be *blamed* for wanting him. What scared him the most, however, was that his desire for Hannibal was growing. The *thing*, whatever it was, it only made Will want him more. He just looked so open and pliant when he got that expression, and the unspoken tension between them made Will's mind wander into dangerous territory. What if this became more than desire? What if it developed into infatuation, and then potentially love? Without Molly around, it was certainly looking that way; he'd barely spent a week in Hannibal's presence and he was already ridiculously taken with him. It was daunting. Half of him was desperate for this to be over, so he could go home and forget that some very real feelings for Hannibal were wearing away at his heart, but the other half wanted different. The other half was screaming at him to prolong the Tour, or at the very least, savour it while it lasted. That half wanted to sink down in front of Hannibal, right now, and kiss him senseless. Kiss him the way he should've kissed Will all those months ago.

Hannibal's breath moved from where it was caught in his throat to release in a trembling exhale, shaking Will from his rogue thoughts.

“Will-”

“We should go to dinner,” he blurted out, and nearly winced at the volume of it as it broke the quiet, building atmosphere. “They'll be serving it soon. We should, um. Go.”

If he hadn't been able to read Hannibal's face before, he certainly could now. The disappointment there was guilt-inducing, but Will knew that destroying the odd mix of peace and suspense in the room had been for the best. Whatever Hannibal had been about to say, it was probably for the best that Will didn't hear it. He didn't want to.

He wished things were easy in their relationship, sometimes. He wished he and Hannibal were regular friends that hadn't met through the Games, and that he wasn't harbouring an embarrassing, one-sided attraction towards him. He wished they were normal and ordinary and safe. But then… that wasn't *them*. What substance was there, then? It wasn't who they were and it wasn't how they were with each other. They had met in the Games. Their bond had been formed through trauma, and of course, their relationship was likely codependent and unhealthy, but Will wouldn't trade it for the world. This was *his* Hannibal. His relationship. He loved it for what it was. Occasionally he'd long for a different life in general,

and was it really so bad that he wanted Hannibal to be a part of it? It didn't mean he forgot how important their current dynamic was to him.

Dinner, as rich and filling as it was, went down tasting like nothing. He could barely concentrate on eating while Hannibal was looking at him across the table like that. Will wasn't able to tell if he thought he was being subtle with the frequent glances or if he simply didn't care. Probably the latter, knowing Hannibal- he was absolutely shameless. It was part of the allure, really. Alana, his saviour, was the one to finally break the silence at the table by engaging Hannibal in conversation, possibly to end the awkwardness of Hannibal's gaze on Will, if her curious looks were anything to go by. It was then that Bev stood and motioned for him to follow, and Will was glad Hannibal was otherwise occupied so he couldn't ambush Will as soon as they left the room. Not that he would quite *ambush* him, but… Will was a little tired of spending the entire Victory Tour on edge, pinned like a butterfly under Hannibal's dark eyes. He needed a break from the constant electricity that sparked throughout his body whenever Hannibal was near.

“I feel like I haven't seen you in a while,” Bev said, once they were in the safety of her darkened room. “Ever since the start of the Victory Tour you two have barely left his room. Anything you want to tell me?”

“I don't know what you're talking about,” he denied.

“Are you two fucking?”

He was shocked by the brazenness of it, and the vulgarity of the language used. He was no stranger to cursing, but the thought of 'Hannibal' and 'fucking', together… it stunned him silent. He would never *fuck* Hannibal, nor the other way around. If they were ever intimate, then they would be exactly that: *intimate*. Whether it was rough or tender, their connection would still remain. Fucking was nameless, faceless, anonymous. Love-making sounded cloying, intercourse sounded clinical, and everything else was far too casual. But all seemed more accurate than *fucking*.

“No.”

“Are you lying?”

“I have a girlfriend,” he admitted, and watched shock dawn on her face. “I haven't told anyone, but yeah. These last few months, disappearing all night, barely being home, sneaking off at lunch… I was seeing her. I still am. So no, I'm not fucking Hannibal.”

“*What?* Why didn't you tell me?”

“I'm sorry. I don't know, I just… I think I needed something for me and nobody else. Something private. It wasn't about keeping it from you specifically.”

She sighed, hand rubbing across her forehead, surprise beginning to recede from her eyes. It must've been strange for her, to hear that. To realise he'd been hiding something from her for *months*. A slight distance had begun to form between them ever since they got back to District 4, sure, but they usually told each other *everything*. Now, they were growing up.

Now, they'd experienced traumas that were so similar yet so very different at the same time. He loved her, always would, but they weren't little kids anymore. They needed space. And a bit of secrecy.

“Who is she?”

“Her name is Molly.”

“Is she that girl from the year above?” At Will's affirmative nod, she smiled. “She's pretty. How'd you manage to pull *her?”*

“Shut up, she isn't like that. She's great.”

“I'm sure she is. I'm happy for you,” she said. There was a beat, before she asked: “but what about Hannibal?”

“What *about* Hannibal?”

“You've been spending a lot of time together,” she remarked. “Are you sure there's nothing there?”

“I'm sure,” he lied. She didn't need to know about his worryingly rapid spread of feelings. “I mean, I know we're supposed to get married, but it isn't like that. It isn't *real*. We'll probably be seeing other people on the side. We aren't in *love*.”

“Does *he* know that?”

Chapter End Notes

GOD i'm so excited about this fic at the moment. If you know the hunger games stories you can probably guess what's eventually going to happen, but for now I get to really play with their dynamic and i'm LIVING!!!! This is slightly longer than bluebell, so I hope you're all excited for a lot of upcoming content :)

Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

His conversation with Bev weighed on his mind throughout the rest of the Tour. Perhaps he had been a little hasty in assuming exactly how married life would go for them, and in hindsight he seemed fairly insensitive. He had no *idea* what Hannibal wanted, and he hadn't taken any of his potential views or opinions into perspective when imagining what their shared future would be like. Of course, it was likely that Hannibal wanted a similar arrangement seeing as the marriage was forced, but *still*. It had been unfair of Will to presume. However, bringing it up was a different matter entirely- yes they spent nights curled up in the same bed, yes Hannibal woke him up from nightmares nearly constantly, and yes they spoke about almost everything with each other, but Will wasn't quite ready to make this a reality. To imagine everything would work out and that they would only be marriage in title was living in a dream world. Their lives would be highly publicised, and seeing other people at the same time would eventually be figured out. They would be expected to maintain an obviously loving life and household together for the media and the Capitol. He would be expected to live a lie.

Short conversations about their arranged marriage with either Bev or Hannibal didn't quite tap into the *pain* of it. Honestly and genuinely talking about how they were going to live and what it was going to be like… he wasn't ready for that. Not in the slightest. This was his *life,* and it had been ripped away from him by Verger. He had to fight to keep the glare off his face when they reached the Capitol, had to really work at hiding his resentment and sorrow at the hand he'd been dealt.

Hannibal could tell. He could read Will like nobody else. His steadying hand on Will's back was a small comfort.

That had been something they'd developed, recently. A wordless communication system: Hannibal's hand on his back meant support. It had been there in District 7, with Franklyn's sad and similar-looking family, in 6, when they had to speak about Buddish, and in 2, where Budge still haunted him. Will wondered if he'd have to do the same when they began to climb back up the list of Districts and visited District 1, where the memory of Chiyoh would be inescapable and alive. They hadn't seen if it worked the other way around yet, since Will was usually the one in need of reassurance in their relationship.

“Will, what's it like finally getting to spend time with Hannibal again after going months without? Chilton asked, exuberant and curious.

“It's like a dream come true,” Will answered, with a smile that was both sly and bashful.

Making it seem as if they were falling in love was key. Verger hadn't put too much pressure on them to actually make it official, and it was all part of the tease, really. It would happen- it would have to. They just didn't know when. Now was the period before, a sweet build-up, so that the Capitol would be even happier when it finally happened, and able to gush about how

they'd known all along. It was in the little things; the loving gazes they'd shoot at each other on the stages in the Districts, the blatant physical contact, the occasional kiss on the cheek. It felt saccharine, as he wasn't really an openly affectionate person, and he knew for a *fact* that Hannibal wasn't, but apparently the Capitol *loved* it. Practically salivated over it. That was clear now they were in the Capitol itself, and Will could see the excitement and elation on the faces of the audience. He and Hannibal were the most thrilling thing in their lives, right now. He felt a little sad for them, but the minute he turned and saw another unnecessarily extravagant and expensive display, any sympathy he might've had fizzled into irritation.

“It's a shame we don't live closer, really,” Hannibal remarked, forcing his voice to sound faraway and sad. “Or at least, have some way to visit each other.”

A few sympathetic sighs were thrown from the audience, overdramatic and pitying. They really thought *this* was their main problem. That they weren't kept awake at night by nightmares or hyper-vigilance, that the Games didn't invade every happy thought they had. That the Games would shape the rest of their lives and who they became as people. The Capitol were either unaware of the damage the Games did to victors, or they were wilfully ignorant. Will wasn't sure which was worse. It wasn't as if he didn't *miss* Hannibal, and didn't agree it was a shame they couldn't see each other, but that *really* wasn't top of his list of problems right now.

When Verger made his surprise visit, much to the delight of the Capitol, Will was well and truly exhausted. Playing this part got tiring sometimes, this mask that he had almost perfected wasn't the most comfortable thing to wear. Verger's grip was tight on his arm, too tight, as he pulled him in for quick embrace, which Will suspected was only so he could whisper “soon” in his ear. He knew instantly what it meant, and was crippled by how sudden it was all happening. 'Soon' probably meant their first public appearance after the Tour. He'd be lucky if it didn't mean the end of the tour *itself*. It wasn't out of the question. He could only gaze at Verger in horror as he pulled away, and spend the rest of their time on stage in a daze. It *was*, wasn't it? They'd have to make a big public spectacle in one of their home Districts, likely 4, and finally confirm their already highly speculated about relationship. It was going to be utterly *excruciating*.

He felt trapped, stifled, panicky. Even later at Verger's house, with the party in full swing and a delicious meal settled in his stomach, everything felt like too *much*. Despite Hannibal's presence at his side, calming and grounding, he was still entirely untethered, senses haywire. The sounds of clashing cutlery and background conversations were deafening, the bright colours of the decorations were blinding. Breath was all too scarce. The sips of alcohol he'd been consuming all night probably didn't help.

“I need some air,” he finally muttered, rising from the table and squeezing through the crowd before anyone could protest. He wasn't even sure who'd been at the table, really, after a while. Hannibal had been there. Perhaps Beverly. He thought he'd seen Alana dancing with Margot.

Fresh air was a sweet relief, a cold rush on his face that he gasped down in desperate need, sobering up a little. He liked being outside. Outside was pure and raw, and inside, especially at the Capitol, was artificial. That could be comforting sometimes, but not now. Now it was simply a reminder of his bleak future, and it felt as if the walls were closing in on him:

crushing, paralysing. At least outside, whether it was the Capitol or not, he could breathe. This was real. This was what mattered. Cold air and the night sky- they made him feel alive. Reality felt altered here, like the universe was off its axis, like the stars and the sky were so far away and they were so much *bigger* than him, than *all* of this, so why did his tiny existence matter? Insignificance could be soothing.

He remembered, back in the Games, if they couldn't find shelter, sometimes he and Hannibal would lay next to one another and stare up at the night sky together. It felt private, a little world that only they could see, constellations made just for them. Of course, those stars had been fake. But the conversations they'd had underneath them, the steadily blooming rose of their friendship, the molten darkness of Hannibal's eyes on him… that hadn't been fake.

Through the crowd that had overspilled from the mansion to outside, he could see that the grounds stretched on for what looked like miles. He pushed through the clumps of people, heart hammering in his chest, until he broke through the mass of people, stumbling further along the garden and settling on a bench, tipsy and relieved.

“It's too gaudy,” someone said, and he turned to see a pretty blonde woman standing near him, obviously having come from the end of the garden, where it was deserted and silent, peaceful. From here he could still hear the music and buzz of conversation. As she got closer, he saw it was Bedelia. They hadn't really spoken all that much, despite living on the same train for the past few weeks. “All the people make you feel more alone. They're empty.”

She offered him the bottle of wine that had been loosely clutched in her hand. He stared at it sceptically, knowing drowning his sorrows in alcohol wasn't the healthiest move, before actively ignoring the concept of self-care and reaching for the bottle. The wine was bitter and smooth as it went down, but its sharpness had the opposite effect of what he'd expected. It was dulling to his senses, rather than intensifying. He thought it was kind of disgusting, actually, but it was better than sitting in there, and it kind of made him forget this was all happening.

“It terrifies you, doesn't it,” Bedelia remarked a few minutes later, after he'd nearly polished off the rest of the bottle and was in the process of returning it to her. It wasn't a question, despite its misleading phrasing. “Your engagement to Hannibal.”

“Wouldn't it terrify *you?”*

“Is Hannibal really so horrible?”

“*No*. I don't know why *he* thought it was about that and I don't know why *you* do,” he grumbled. “It's about *them*. The Capitol. How they're taking this choice away from me. It has nothing to do with Hannibal specifically. Are you telling me that isn't a problem at all for him?”

She sipped from the bottle, face considering, before choosing her words carefully. As carefully as someone drunk could.

“The arranged marriage is a problem for him,” she explained slowly, seemingly figuring it out herself as she went along. “The idea that you don't get a choice troubles him. But… I

don't think bothers him for the same reasons it bothers you."

His mind was clouded with alcohol, and the words did make sense, they just didn't… fit. He couldn't look deeper at them, could barely bring himself to want to.

"What reasons?" he asked, fuzzy brain only a little tinged with curiosity.

"I don't think it's quite my place to disclose that," she denied him, a small knowing smirk curving the edge of her mouth.

"So you know?"

"I believe so."

He would have urged more, but she offered him the bottle again, and how could he refuse? It was the only thing that had successfully distracted him from the inevitability of his restrictive future. She watched him as he drank from it, eyes narrowed, expression confused, like she was trying to see right through him. There was something in her gaze that bewildered him, it wasn't quite jealousy, but… lack of understanding. Maybe a *little* bit of envy. Even bewilderment, he thought.

Voices from the patio grew in volume as more people filtered through the doors into the garden. He wasn't quite sure what was going on, but he watched in a detached sort of interest as the crowd increased in size, trying to ignore Bedelia's eyes on him, tipping the stinging alcohol down his throat. Whatever she meant, he could think on it later. Now was time for avoiding the garish swirl of colours and loudness that the Capitol brought. It was too gutting a reminder of what was to come.

"When?" he asked. He doubted Bedelia had too much of a say in it, doubted she *cared* enough to partake in whatever Jack and Freddie had arranged for them, but he was almost certain she knew.

"One."

It was a mercy, one from Jack and Freddie, for him. He wouldn't have to make a scene in front of his family that way, while District 1 was Career enough and invested enough to please Verger. It was perfect, really, and Will's kindest option at this point. He couldn't deny that he was grateful.

"Do we get to decide how?"

"As far as I'm aware."

"It doesn't seem to affect you at all," he commented acerbically. He didn't expect much sympathy for himself, but he'd seen Bedelia and Hannibal together; they'd speak in hushed tones and share knowing looks, and apart from Will, Bedelia seemed to be the person Hannibal was closest to on that train. "Do you not care?"

"Of course I care," she whispered in horror, eyes still resting on him, now affronted. Will waited patiently for her explanation, watching as her drunken mind gathered the words. "I've

known Hannibal for a long time, you know. Since he was a child, I'd seen him around the District. Then, his sister died, and in such a terrible way- it was recommended he have sessions with me by one of the healers." *That* perked Will's interest, a jolting surprise. "I spoke to him almost every week for two years, until he deemed himself well enough to abstain from the sessions. We remained acquaintances. Even *friends*, arguably. I *wish* he hadn't volunteered. I *wish* he wasn't being forced into marriage with you. But… he seems happy enough."

"*Happy?* A minute ago you said he was bothered by it just as much as *I* am."

"But not in the same way. It's *different*. It's complicated. He *does* seem happy, though, happier than he's been in a long time." Will could only gaze at her in abject bafflement. "Simply put, the way he is with you… I've never seen him like it. He's so open. So… careless."

It very nearly shocked him from his drunken haze, but not quite. Presumably, Bedelia knew Hannibal quite well, considering her years of experience and the sessions she had with him previously. So to hear that he changed Hannibal in a way like no other, from *her* of all people, was both warming and chilling. *He* meant that much to *Hannibal*.

"I don't understand."

"I know. We all know."

"Who's 'we'?"

She didn't get to answer, however, due to a warm presence arriving behind them, the air shifting around it. They turned simultaneously with their slightly delayed reflexes to see it was Hannibal, looking dark and dashing in the moonlight, much more natural now he wasn't under the bright glare of the Capitol lights inside.

"Bedelia," he acknowledged. "Will."

His voice sounded thicker when he said Will's name. Or perhaps Will was imagining it, the drink making him hear things.

That was probably it.

"Hi," Will said stupidly, unable to prevent a silly grin from spreading across his face, and Hannibal smiled back, oddly demure.

"The fireworks are about to start," he said, a statement that explained the flood of people on the patio who were working their way down the garden, closer and closer to where Bedelia and Will were sitting.

"I've heard they're pretty," he tried to interject, but it came out embarrassingly slurred. The bottle was emptier than he'd thought- he'd drunk more than intended.

"They are," Hannibal assured, and Will saw Bedelia roll her eyes from the corner of his view, as she rose from the bench and reluctantly made her way towards the masses of people, still

as elegant as ever, even drunk. Will supposed she'd had lots of practice pretending.

Hannibal replaced her on the bench, much closer and much warmer, both in temperature and temperament. He smiled at Will, throat bobbing. It was then that the fireworks began, a shocking explosion of coloured light that fell down like raindrops. His eyes flew to the sea of black that was the sky almost immediately, diverting from Hannibal's face, as pretty as it was in the light of the moon. He'd never seen them in real life, only when the Capitol publicised their ceremonies on TV, and he'd always thought they were beautiful, but now… they were *captivating*. Like stars, but better. Bright and temporary and awe-inspiring. He imagined he could feel his heart beating in his chest, rocketing a mile a minute.

Throughout the whistles and bangs and blues and reds, his eyes roved back to Hannibal, curious as to his reaction. He wasn't looking at the fireworks. Granted, they had only just started, but he hadn't moved, and his stare was fixed only on Will, eyes glistening in the colours and face morphed into that familiar expression Will still couldn't name. Will was more transfixed than he had ever been with the fireworks, and Hannibal almost appeared in the same state, unmoving, breath gone.

He watched the glow of the bright explosions illuminate Hannibal's face, his devastatingly handsome face, his wonder-struck face that was focused only on him, and fell.

Chapter End Notes

I'm sorry for my weirdly scheduled updates lol, and also for how long it takes me to reply to all of your comments! procrastination is EVIL, but i hope you all know I appreciate your feedback <3 Hope you enjoy the chapter!

Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Hannibal's lips were startlingly warm and just as soft as he remembered as he stretched up to kiss him in District 1, thousands of eyes resting on them. He squeezed his own eyes shut and pretended not to feel that intimidating rush of emotions when their lips touched: excitement and hope and crippling fear. Pain knowing that Molly was at home waiting for him. Embarrassment at how public it was. It was so blatantly staged, so unnatural and *stilted*. That didn't matter to him though, not entirely, because he couldn't help what he felt. Pretend as he might, those emotions were still *there*. He still *wanted* Hannibal, however fake this happened to be.

But if the shocked cheers from the crowd were anything to go by, they bought it. It had been timed just right, of course, right as they finished their speeches. What the crowd hadn't seen, however, was the way Will's fingers had been linked with Hannibal's nearly the entire time, a small comfort while Chiyoh was remembered.

Hannibal's jaw was clenched when Will pulled back, glancing up awkwardly at his face, frustrated at the whole situation. Hannibal looked nothing but irritated. Of course he did- this elaborate romance story with Will was nothing but an inconvenience to him, whereas Will was stuck in this embarrassing and inescapable cycle of unwanted, mortifying feelings for him. How pitiful.

“Are you angry at me?” he asked, voice in undertones as the ceremony ended and the anthem began to play.

“Why would I be angry at you?”

“You just seem...”

“I'm not angry, Will. Not at you.”

It had finally caught up with him, then. The crushing weight of having no free will. Whatever Bedelia had been spouting back at the Capitol, Will hadn't really understood, and was too drunk to care at the time. The morning after, he was too worried about his horrifying realisation of the depth of his feelings and too embarrassed about the drunken affection he'd shown Hannibal the night before to preoccupy himself with the ramblings of someone who was only guessing. It wasn't like he'd admitted anything out loud or even done anything remotely sexual, but the odd closeness he'd kept with Hannibal for the rest of the night and the way he'd clutched him later in bed had been fairly humiliating. Those issues were much more in the forefront of his mind.

This kiss… it was the beginning of the end. They could both feel it. On the one hand, once they got married and were hidden away in a nice house somewhere, years from now, they'd likely only be required to make a few media appearances a year and this whole mess could be

over. But on the other hand, it was the end of life as they knew it. Nothing would ever be the same again. This was who they *were*, now. This was who they had to be. If before it had seemed like there was no way to escape this fate, now it was absolutely definite. It felt like that very first train ride to the Capitol all over again, that hovercraft ride to the arena, the ominous never-ending dread of a journey he wanted over but ongoing at the same time, because what waited at the end was the unknown. The unknown was worse, in some ways.

Concentration was a lost hope throughout the rest of their District 1 visit. His interest piqued briefly and slightly at the sight of Hannibal greeting his uncle, but once he saw the way the man moved and talked, the interest was gone. He wasn't sure what he'd been expecting, but there was none of Hannibal's smooth intellect and control, just mildness and meek smiles. He didn't seem like a bad person, just someone Will wasn't particularly motivated to meet. It was apparently the other way around for Hannibal, as he kept gazing at Will curiously once they were finally on their way to District 4, letting the motion of the train rock them to sleep, spending their last night together, Will in that familiar position cushioned in his arms.

“What are your family like?” he asked eventually, breaking the silence in the compartment.

“I don't know. Like me, I guess. A little.”

“I look forward to meeting them.”

“It's not that big a deal,” he protested.

“It is. They're important to you, Will,” Hannibal explained. “So they're important to me.” He felt far too warm at those words. At any words from Hannibal confirming that he *did* care about Will, to an extent, even if it wasn't quite in the way he wanted. “Besides, your sister was so popular she made someone outside of her family volunteer for her. She must be something quite special.”

“She is,” Will answered, lightning fast. He smiled to himself, reminiscent. “Everyone knows it.”

Looking up, he could see Hannibal's brow twitch into a small frown, intrigued by Will's inflection of it. “Elaborate?”

“There was some stuff… way back. When we were both just kids.” He struggled not only to put it into a coherent sentence, but to gather the correct memories. “Her dad. Her real dad, that is… he was a killer. Abducted and murdered eight girls from the District before he went crazy and tried to kill his wife and daughter.”

“The Peacekeepers didn't stop him? Or they didn't know?”

“They had no idea it was him. None of us did. It was just a terrible tragedy that we couldn't quite figure out. Not until he went for his wife, at least. Nobody knew until morning. He'd run off in the night, his wife was long dead by the time people found out. Abigail, though… she was untouched. Completely and utterly fine. It was kind of a miracle. So yeah, everyone knows she's special. The stares and whispers… they don't ever get easier for her. But in the last few years she's become less of a killer's daughter and more the survivor of a murderer.”

“You're proud,” Hannibal observed.

“Yeah. She's really strong for such a little girl. She's been through a lot.”

There was a lull in the conversation, and Will was powerless to stop his mind rushing to accommodate for memories he'd never quite made sense of. A man. The light of the moon. Bloodied lips and red-ringed eyes.

See?

His only reaction to the flash of images was to inhale sharply and let his eyes flicker closed and open again. But Hannibal saw- he *always* saw. That was what he *did*, with Will. He saw everything.

“There's more,” he said, observing. Will felt his throat constrict, faint panic streaming through his brain.

“Maybe.”

“Maybe?”

“I don't know. I don't remember, exactly.”

“But there *is* more?”

He could only nod, mouth dry and head ringing. He'd never quite admitted it aloud, the dormant knowledge that something else had happened that night. The even more frustrating awareness was that he couldn't quite remember it, couldn't quite *get* there. It was like his mind was *blocking* it, and he didn't know whether that was to protect him or to keep that information from him. His mind was a tangled mess of thorns that only saved to hurt him more if he prodded, if he tried to remember. It was usually much better if he just left it alone, which was what he'd tended to do for the last decade; it wasn't like the brief surges of memory kept him up at night, at least not anymore. His nightmares were occupied by far worse things, nowadays.

His inability to answer verbally stilled Hannibal's curious questioning, and he pulled a gentle hand up and down Will's arm, a sympathetic caress, a kind apology. Now was the worst time for either one of them to be uncomfortable: this would be the last night they'd get curled up in the same bed for potentially a long time. Tomorrow was to be District 4, the victor's District, the final stop. There had been little discussion as to how the subject of three victors with two different home Districts would be sorted- Bev and Will were both from District 4, making it the obvious finishing point. It was just easier, that way. It meant tomorrow was their last day together, though, and he didn't know the next time he'd get to see Hannibal. Another Capitol-organised event, probably. But how long away would that be? It was likely to be at least a few months.

“I'll miss you,” he found himself whispering, catching Hannibal's hand as it drifted along its trip up Will's arm, intertwining their fingers and lifting his head for their eyes to meet. Hannibal softened again, in that way that he did.

He swallowed, eyes falling shut, and dropped his forehead against Will's, who could only sigh in reply and reciprocate by closing his eyes too. He had to pretend his heart wasn't rushing in his chest as he felt Hannibal's warm breath brush against his face, his lips, ghosts of kisses they'd shared earlier that day and all those months ago. It was easy to feel it sometimes, when Hannibal was this close; phantom reminders of days gone by, their long and complicated history re-shared in a breath, eager and familiar and irreplaceable.

“I'll miss you too,” Hannibal murmured, thick with quivering emotion, fit to bursting with a tremulous and unspoken truth. “Horribly. Ridiculously.”

He'd known, before the Victory Tour, that he'd fall straight back into this inescapable whirlwind of charm that Hannibal exuded like sticky blood from a corpse. He'd known, but he hadn't tried to stop it, because why would he? How *could* he? The high stinging of adrenaline and awe when he was around Hannibal was the very foundation upon which they had formed their relationship, dysfunctional as it may be. He'd known going in that even if he tried to stop himself, there was a good chance he wouldn't be able to. He'd been falling for Hannibal since early on. Somewhere along in the Games, at least. He knew it, really, that letting himself jump right into this deep pool of unnameable emotion was a mistake, and if he did so again then he wouldn't be able to get out, he'd *never* get out, because Hannibal and his dark eyes and sweet smile took no prisoners. He'd known all this before the Victory Tour. But he let it happen anyway. He *wanted* it to happen, sort of.

He wanted *Hannibal*.

Hannibal, who had his forehead pressed against Will's, his lips inches away, the end of his nose brushing his cheek, the closest to kissing they could get, the closest to kissing they had. The closest to kissing that Hannibal would give him. The closest he would want. Because that was the truth of the matter: Hannibal did not want Will, not in the same way Will wanted him. Will was hungry and devoted, and Hannibal remained indifferent, unwanting, unyielding.

As much as the lack of free will bothered him, as much as the Capitol involvement in his life irritated him, there was another aspect to this mess that he'd been determinedly trying not to think about.

He would have to spend the rest of his life married to a man that didn't want him back.

***

When he woke, Will could see District 4 in the far distance already, a looming end to what had sadly been an eventful trip, beaming through the window. He couldn't help thinking, coming round to consciousness wrapped in Hannibal's arms, staring out at the blue-tinged sky of morning, about Molly. He'd woken up like this every day of the Victory Tour. It wasn't cheating, but… it certainly felt like it. Not at the beginning, when it was just him falling back into the pattern they'd had in the Games, but now, when he was very nearly in love with Hannibal… it felt *wrong*.

His feelings for Hannibal were another matter entirely. He hadn't considered the fact that he was still in a relationship with someone *else* he cared about since that night at the Capitol,

when the building fire between them had come to a head and solidified as real, potential, proper *love.* But now, he'd see her again, *soon*. What was he supposed to do*?* Break up with her? He didn't want to do that- he cherished her, deeply, and couldn't bear the thought of not being with her. If he didn't do that, though, what *then?* Did he need to tell her? Or just leave it and hope his want for Hannibal faded? What was the courtesy in relationships when someone fell for someone else?

It was a mess of his own making. She didn't deserve this, and he would have to figure it out.

But finishing the Victory Tour would come first.

Chapter End Notes

I had been dropping some hints in bluebell about a certain reveal in this chapter, I hope some of you picked up on it :)

Chapter 9

“What's District One like?” Abigail was asking Hannibal, eyes wide and blue.

Conversation had bloomed between them instantly, much to Will's surprise and happiness. It was odd, but sweet, seeing them together. A tiny part of him preferred it to the idea of Abigail and Molly speaking, before he berated himself for even thinking it. How *cruel*. This wasn't an active choice between them, because their relationships weren't the *same*. He had no right.

The dinner at the mayor's house was a little bigger than any dinners or banquets he'd had in other Districts, because along with District officials and richer, well-known families, there were Will and Bev's relatives too. Not that it added *too* many people, but it still felt crowded, the stifling socialising just that little bit *more*. He'd never been good at being social. It just wasn't where he excelled. He'd do much better fishing or looking after dogs or getting into someone's head, anything that didn't require *people*, ones that weren't at a distance.

Hannibal, for the first time in a while, seemed to be ignoring him to talk to someone else. Abigail, of all people. It meant Will couldn't be upset or jealous. He was *glad*. Sighing, he pushed the food he wasn't all that hungry for around his plate, making the mistake of glancing up. Molly was standing there, the opposite side of the dining hall. His heart dropped like a stone to his stomach, shock settling there with delight and awkwardness. It was great to see her, of course, but *here?* Now? With *Hannibal* at his side? He felt *beyond* uncomfortable. She was clutching one of those jugs the other waiting staff were, and he suspected she'd applied to help out at the dinner just so she'd get to see him earlier. He was such an asshole, and she was so perfect. He'd been away for weeks, sharing a bed with someone else, who he just happened to be in love with. He couldn't believe he was doing this to her- he'd never really thought he'd be *that* guy. The kind of guy that the girls in school would inevitably end up crying over, despite the obvious ending that had been on the cards since the beginning. At least it wasn't simply to hurt her, like some boys, but the way he'd been acting was thoughtless and unkind. He owed her an apology, he *knew*, but that also meant he'd have to tell her about all of this. Which was something that he didn't quite want.

She sent him a secret smile across the room, sweet and suggestive and obvious to anyone who saw what they were to each other. He wanted to turn away, to make his irritation obvious, so she knew that she *shouldn't be here*, that she *shouldn't be doing this*, but… he *couldn't*. At the sight of her and that smile, he was helpless to do anything but grin back, uncontrollable and utterly thrilled. He cared about her. He *did*. And he'd missed her, more than he'd realised, right until now. Watching as she sauntered over, leaning to top up his glass.

“Will,” she said, voice full and thick, joyful.

“Molly,” he replied, fighting the beaming smile that wanted to sweep across his face.

He stared as she strolled away after filling his glass, attempting to hide his smirk. Bev evidently saw, pressing an elbow gently into his side, making him turn to see her exasperated

expression.

“So *obvious*,” she hissed at him, but it was amused.

A chair squeaked horribly beside him, making them both swivel to look. Hannibal was rising from his seat, expression twisted into an agonising mix of fury and sorrow. “Excuse me,” he muttered, strained, pushing his chair away further and stalking off from the table, ducking through the archway leading away from the dining hall. Will frowned, and saw a few faces turning to the spot he disappeared from, looking equally as confused. Abigail looked the most stunned, mouth open like she'd been halfway through a sentence.

“What just happened?” he asked, and felt his bewilderment grow as Bev shot Abigail a knowing look that made understanding dawn on her face. She bit her lip, wincing, face shifting in sympathy, eyes flickering to Hannibal's empty chair and then to the archway. He huffed at the ridiculous unspoken communication between them, one they'd been using for *years*, but had gotten much worse in these past few months. “*What?”*

“Go after him,” Beverly urged with another elbow to his side, and he glared at her in response, standing his ground by staying sat down. She didn't budge, however, simply kept up their heated staring match, and as stubborn as he was, he had nothing on her.

“*Fine*,” he mumbled, getting to his feet and leaving as quietly as he could, not wanting to make the same sort of scene Hannibal had.

Spotting Hannibal in the corridor was a lost hope, apparently, as it was bare and empty apart from a few attendees drinking in cluttered groups, so Will assumed he'd catch him lingering outside the mayor's house- perhaps he'd needed fresh air. But there was no sign of him. Not inside the house, and not outside. He found himself wandering further, up the short dirt track stretching away from the doors, walking until he reached the gates that marked the end of the mayor's grounds. Hannibal was nowhere to be seen, unable to be found. Will supposed he would've caught up with him if he'd just left a minute earlier.

Really, he wanted to go back inside. Hannibal was off somewhere for whatever reason, being his usual dramatic self, and probably just needed an hour or two to pull himself together. But… Will felt guilty. Like some of the blame was his. He had no idea what was going on or what had affected Hannibal, and it was likely nothing to do with him, but… Hannibal was his friend. His future husband. And he'd stormed off into the midst of a District he didn't know his way around, probably upset or angry and clouded with emotion. What if he couldn't find his way back? It was Will's responsibility to *find* him, at least, whether they talked about what had just occurred or not. So he kept going. Followed his instincts and let his feet take him where he needed to go, along past the market, on the short pathway through the wooded area that spread along the side of the river. It wasn't all that different to how the arena had been structured.

Hannibal was there, sitting cross-legged on the riverbank, watching the rush of water stream its natural course. His face was far off, distant. It was funny, Will thought, but in all the time they'd known each other, he'd never once seen Hannibal sitting this way; it seemed too young, too informal.

“Are you okay?” he asked, puncturing the near-silence they'd been in, save for the wind brushing through the trees and the river flowing. It didn't make Hannibal start, of course. First of all, he'd never do something so undignified, and second, he'd probably known Will was there anyway. He was like that, sometimes. Almost superhuman with his senses.

“Fine.” His voice sounded a little hoarse, but perhaps Will was imagining it. He moved forward, sinking to the ground beside him, too close but too far at the same time. He could feel the electricity fizzle across the inches between them, goosebumps washing over his skin. Hannibal's head was ducked, staring at the ground, unwilling look at Will.

“You left.”

“I did. Do apologise to Abigail for me, I fear I was quite rude.”

“I'm sure she won't mind.”

Hannibal looked over, throat bobbing, cheeks flushed and eyes holding a raw, delicate power, but still not quite meeting Will's eyes. Will could see, in the faint light of darkening twilight, that his eyelashes were wet. Had it rained? He was almost sure it *hadn't*.

“Was that your girlfriend?” Hannibal asked, a slight tremble in the last word.

“You saw that?” Will asked, embarrassed humour in his tone. But Hannibal wasn't smiling in return. “Um, yeah. Kind of. It's been a few months now, is all.”

“Oh.” It was the simplest reply, devoid of all emotion or inflection. Will didn't know what it meant, and Hannibal felt impossible to read right now, utterly imperceptible. But he knew Hannibal better than he'd thought. Will had come here for a reason, and it wasn't because he loved the river. It was because *Hannibal* was here, and he'd *known* it. *How* he'd known, was something he didn't understand. “Do you love her?” Hannibal asked, barely a whisper.

“I… No,” Will answered truthfully. “Not exactly. Don't get me wrong, she's great, and I like her a lot. I *could* love her. I probably will, soon. But… we haven't really been together that long. It's not like that between us, not yet. I don't know, it's hard to explain.”

“I think I understand,” Hannibal murmured, and Will swallowed, concerned.

“Are you angry?”

“Why would I be angry?”

“You just seem… irritated,” he spoke gently. “We've never talked about whether we were allowed to see other people or not, and I'd understand if you were angry.”

“*Allowed?”* Hannibal repeated, indignant, no longer oddly avoidant of Will's gaze. “I would never… you're allowed to do whatever you want. I would never force you to-”

“No, I know, I'm sorry,” Will hurriedly interrupted. “I didn't mean it like that. But… we *are* going to marry each other.” The words felt foreign in his mouth. He hated admitting it out

loud, especially to Hannibal himself. “I know it's not a marriage for love, but... it's still marriage. It's fine if you're annoyed about this. You can tell me.”

“I'm under no false pretences about our future together, Will. You're at liberty to be with whomever you please. As long as you hide it from the Capitol, I won't stop you.”

“So… you *aren't* annoyed about this? Then what's the problem?”

“I never said…” Hannibal paused, sighing, and looking away from Will again. “It's complicated. You wouldn't understand.”

“Try me.”

“I *have*,” he said bitterly. “Aside from actually telling you, I've indicated *quite* clearly what the situation is. But you don't *understand*. You're supposed to be the one who's good at reading people, you're supposed to be...” He sighed again, cutting himself off. Will was shocked. He'd never heard Hannibal speak so fast- the way he was talking couldn't quite be classed as frantic in normal terms, since even when frustrated Hannibal spoke clearly, beautifully and articulately, but for *Hannibal*… It was most definitely frantic. “You don't understand.”

“Then why not explain it?” Will questioned softly. “Why not just tell me?”

Hannibal huffed, and Will could see his expression crease into one of exasperation. “It's harder than you'd think,” he began. “And I don't want to have to come to you about this. If things were different, if Verger weren't forcing us to marry, then I'd probably…” He shook his head. “I can't. Not with us like this. Not with this on our shoulders. I can't tell you. It would be cruel. Especially now.”

“I… don't understand,” Will conceded, feeling slightly angry at himself, but also at Hannibal for his vague explanation. “Is it something to do with Molly?”

“Her name is Molly,” Hannibal said, mostly to himself, sounding detached as he registered it. His jaw clenched. “In part, yes, it is.”

“And it's something to do with us?” he asked hesitantly.

“Yes.” Hannibal smiled, then, amused and fond as he glanced up at him. “Don't worry yourself about it. The problem is mine, not yours.”

“Fine. Okay,” he replied, surrendering his efforts to probe deeper. It seemed as if Hannibal wasn't ready to admit anything. “I'm sorry, Hannibal.”

Blinding affection was the only emotion he could read from Hannibal as he stared back at Will, face in *that* expression again, the one that Will couldn't quite figure out, the one that was all softness and sweetness and stricken sentimentality. His hand snaked out to clutch Hannibal's, where it rested on the grassy bank of the river, squeezing in what he hoped was some small comfort. He left it there, over the smoothness of Hannibal's skin, in what he knew

was dangerous territory, but he was high off the honeyed darkness of Hannibal's eyes and the way his smile looked in the dusk, so couldn't stop himself from taking the risk.

“Thank you, Will,” Hannibal said, low and shaky, clenching his hand in the soil underneath Will's.

“Will you come back to dinner?”

“Of course. Lead the way.”

Will finally pulled his hand away, using it instead as leverage to haul himself to his feet, offering it back to Hannibal after he'd done so. Hannibal's palm fit in his as he helped him to his feet, and he stumbled slightly, leaning on Will for support, his closeness intoxicating. Will smiled awkwardly, moving to step away, expecting Hannibal to follow, but was stopped by a grip tugging on his wrist, bringing him back.

“Will,” Hannibal breathed, before pulling him against his chest, their familiar embrace. “Of course, we'll need to say goodbye out there, in front of the cameras, but I'd like to say it here, first. Properly.” He hesitated, chest hitching and heart hammering under Will's ear. “Not having you by my side will be one of the hardest challenges I'll ever have to face; I'll miss you more immensely than you can ever comprehend. When you aren't there… it *aches*.”

A pang of sympathy and agreement speared through Will's heart: he could comprehend more than Hannibal thought. He didn't reply, just buried his face further into the jut between Hannibal's collarbone and neck, overcome with sadness and fear at the idea of however long he'd have to spend without him. They stood like that, Hannibal's arms trapping him in a prison he didn't want to escape, for a long while. The sky was nearly completely dark by the time they disentangled from one another. This was… what he wanted. Forever. For as long as Hannibal would have him. He *loved* him.

The staggering realisation of his devotion was on his mind as they trudged back to the mayor's house, invading his brain as they finished the meal, pestering him right up until Hannibal, Bedelia and the rest of the District 1 team were herded into cars to transport them to the station. A few reporters hanging around encouraged him to join them in the cars, to go to the station with Hannibal and say goodbye there. They were officially in love, after all. So at Hannibal's welcoming smile, he pressed up against him in the back of one of the sleek, black cars, their thighs touching precariously, sending Will's nerves haywire.

Kissing him on the platform felt like the easiest thing in the world, now. It was after Hannibal had told him goodbye, voice thick with fake tears, loud enough for the reporters to hear but quiet enough that they would assume it was only for Will's ears. He just leant up, pushing their mouths together for a demure kiss, before pulling away and beaming at Hannibal, a nice little tease for the population of the Capitol. Hannibal went straight to the window once on the train, causing what little audience they had to gasp in envy and adoration at their apparent love story, and Will smiled for real then, gazing at him with genuine tenderness.

“Goodbye,” he whispered, hoping Hannibal could read his lips.

Considering the satisfied shift in his expression as the train started to pull away from the station, he could. It was then that Will attempted to memorise his face with renewed vigour; because who knew how long it would be before they next saw each other?

Even an hour was too long.

Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Don't make this harder than it has to be,” Brown purred, agile body curled over him, pressing him into the wet mud, laughing as he struggled. His tongue licked up Will's neck, a terrifying caress that held no affection, just predatory lust. “You'll never forget him, you know. You do *know,* after all.”

“What?” His voice was alien to his own ears, clear and free from fear, miles from what he actually felt.

Brown finally let him go, but Will was too frozen to move, watching in silent horror and confusion as Brown dragged a finger up to his lips, shushing him.

See?

“Don't be a coward.”

It wasn't Brown's voice. He couldn't tell who it belonged to, with its unfamiliar rasp and contained experience, its age, its urging. He felt a hand on his arm, damp and immovable, and by looking down he could see that the dampness came from blood, pouring out between the hand's fingers, a blossoming rose of red. It soaked out until it went straight through his shirt, he could feel it trickling down the bare skin of his arm, and it didn't stop, It just kept coming and coming, endless, insatiable, until the hand got so wet it slipped away. Then he realised that the blood didn't originate from the hand.

It was *him*.

There was a gaping hole in his arm, in his shirt, which he could see now it wasn't covered. He could feel air rushing through it, an empty space, crimson and raw. It hurt. All of him hurt. His other arm, his leg, his hand, his shoulder, his *heart*. He looked and kept looking and saw there were holes all over him, everywhere, he was punctured, blood wringing out of him like sponge. His heart was the worst, a vast cavity right through the middle of him, right where it hurt, letting out all the important stuff and leaving him gasping, desperate. Blood was pooling at his feet, so deep and slick that he fell, splashing into it, wind knocked out of him. He looked up at the sky, searching for the faces of fallen tributes; it was a reflex now, and sometimes he wondered if he'd ever stop waiting to find the dead in the clouds. Sometimes he wondered if he ever *would* find the dead in the clouds. His father might be there.

The anthem beamed out, deafening, distracting, and Abigail was dead.

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The sheets were wet with his sweat when he awoke, dawn just beginning to break and birds starting their morning song. He felt sticky all over, and worried that he might have sweat

right through to the mattress. Well, it didn't matter. They could afford to buy a new one, now. The shower he took to wash away the layer of perspiration coating his skin was scalding but cleansing, clearing his head from the surreal realism of the dream. Although… it had been more of a nightmare, really. He had been terrified. Nightmares weren't all that out of the ordinary these days.

Some nights it was the arena, its grip on him still as strong as it had ever been, even after the better part of a year had passed since he'd been there. He would dream up its tall trees and cold nights, Budge and Brown and Tier dancing across his mind, bloodied silhouettes under the stars. The bad ones were Budge, his smooth voice echoing in Will's ears, his eye socket caving in on itself at the press of a knife. The especially bad ones were the ones where he woke up hard, the phantom feeling of skin and bone breaking underneath his knuckles still present and visceral, the control he had over life and death, over Tier, the most alluring thing he could imagine. The worst of the worst were the ones of Brown. The moon and the rain and the bruises that night had left him with. He didn't remember that much about them after, he suspected he was repressing it, but the tears on his cheeks as he woke were unmistakeable.

Other nights it was *after*, his brain jumping right to extremes, images of Verger holding him down, hands locked around his neck while he choked for air, and the Capitol, cheering him on. Anything was entertainment, right? *After* included Abigail, included Bev, his mother, even *Molly*, any one of them, slaughtered like sacrificial lambs in front of him. Sometimes it was all of them. Verger lined them up, fed them to his ever-hungry litter of fattened pigs. The picture was repulsive, nothing that Will could ever hope to think up while conscious, but he couldn't help what tales his nightmares spun for him.

Recently, however, there had been a new brand of nightmare: Hannibal. He'd always been *there* when Will had these dreams, but they had never really centred around him, save for a few exceptions. But now… the idea of it, of never seeing him again, of watching him die, of living a life by his side, unloved, loving… it was all certainly frightening enough to stir a terror that ran so deep it invaded his subconscious. He wondered if he'd feel brave enough to admit it to him, when he saw him again. At one point he might've been able to predict how Hannibal would react, but this new vulnerability Hannibal had been displaying lately made things… different. *Hannibal* was different. Even more unpredictable than he'd been before.

If Will had counted right, it had been forty six days since they'd last laid eyes on each other. Forty six days since he'd found Hannibal beside the river, had wanted so *desperately* to *understand*, but still couldn't quite grasp it. He hadn't forgotten. He thought about it nearly every day, cast his mind back through all the interactions between them he could remember, searched for something he might've missed. But he came up empty, every time. It didn't make *sense*. It didn't *fit*. It drove him half insane, and people had asked more than once what was wrong with him, as he often trailed off mid-sentence or stared into space for just a little bit too long.

Molly was the one who was most upset by it.

“Where's your head today, Will?” she'd ask, and try to seem supportive and open when he avoided answering, but he could see the cogs shifting behind her eyes, racing to work it out, bothered beyond belief that he was no longer sharing things with her. He felt sorry, he really

did, but… he was far too ashamed and guilty to admit anything about the development in his relationship with Hannibal. So he just watched, in sorrow and regret, as they began to deteriorate. He could feel their time together rolling to an end, but wasn't ready to stop it. Just let it run its natural course, he told himself, and see where it goes.

That wasn't the real reason. The real reason was that he was in love with Hannibal, and wasn't quite sure he wanted to be with her anymore. He'd almost loved her. Almost. But Hannibal had come raging into his life and shredding everything in his path, just like he had in the Games, just like Will had known he would do on the Victory Tour. Typical. Exhilarating. Will longed for his enchanting destructiveness.

“You miss him, don't you?” Bev had asked as they sat by the river a week or two after Hannibal left, legs dipped into the water. If Will had craned his neck, he'd be able to see further up the bank, to the spot where he and Hannibal had sat and hugged.

“Of course I do,” he'd replied, matter-of-fact. “Now can we have a conversation about something that isn't Hannibal for once?”

“I feel like that's the only thing we *can* talk about nowadays!”

“What does *that* mean?”

“It's the only thing you're fucking interested in,” she'd spat. “It's the only thing you'll ever admit things about, because you need someone to talk to about it. But you won't bring it up *yourself*, oh no. It has to be *me*. Because you don't elect to tell me *anything* anymore.” He'd opened his mouth to protest, but she'd cut him off. “Tell me the last time we had a conversation that you started,” she'd ordered, and all he could do was gaze at her in surprise. “You can't.”

He couldn't. He'd looked at her, his best friend of almost seventeen years, and couldn't remember the last time he'd began a conversation with her. His *best friend*. What had *happened* to them? What was *wrong* with him? Of course, the answer to both of those questions was the Games, but there wasn't too much either of them could do about that. They had happened, and they had royally fucked both of them up. The Games never had been famous for being a lot of fun. At least not for the tributes.

“I'm sorry,” he'd whispered. “I'm so sorry. It just… didn't cross my mind. Which I know isn't an excuse, but… there are other things going on. You know that.”

“Yeah,” she'd sighed. “Sadly, I do. I get that you're being forced into marriage and that it's incredibly hard, but Verger has control over me too. I'm not happy either. Don't apologise, just… try more? I guess? That's all I want.”

“Okay,” he'd whispered, their hands finding each other and clinging on tightly. “Okay.”

Bev was his crutch now. She always should've been really, and he felt like an idiot realising how much he needed her support and how much he'd missed her- why hadn't it been like this all along? It would've saved him a lot of heartache. But then again… immediately after the Games, things had been hard. Not specifically between them, just… in general. The only

human interaction he hadn't struggled with was when it was with Abigail and Molly, Abigail because she was what he'd been looking forward to coming back to, and Molly because she'd been new and kind and something different. Bev, while he'd still loved her deeply, had been a reminder. Every time he'd seen her face he'd think of her bloodied ankle or the girl she killed or *Budge*, all things he really *didn't* want on his mind. Most of the time he'd thought she understood. But sometimes he'd catch the hurt on her face as he'd hurried through a conversation, desperate to get away, to escape those memories, and he'd feel terrible all over again. Not only had he been a mess, but he'd been a terrible friend. As if Bev hadn't been having a hard time as well.

If anything, she was having a worse time. He could complain all he wanted about the marriage situation, and while of course that was still *horrible*, Beverly was single-handedly attempting to convince Verger she wasn't running a rebellion, while trying to rehabilitate her leg, which she still limped with even now. He knew she wasn't doing herself any favours by keeping that damn necklace still hanging around her neck, arguably the source of the dissent within Districts and their symbol of hope, but he also knew it was a coping mechanism. The only remnant she had left of her father. A token she'd kept half her life, even throughout the Games. It made her feel strong, made her remember that she was alive. Plus, he knew if his father had left him any parting gifts before he'd perished, he'd be wearing them around his neck, too.

The truth was, Will had never really been all that attached to objects. He hung on to people, like Hannibal or Abigail or Molly, or his dogs, his fish, using them to help him handle whatever he was going through. It was why his token had been a temporary love: a bluebell. That wasn't what kept him grounded.

Not that any of those other things helped anymore; he hadn't been grounded in months. These days, he felt entirely untethered.

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Quiet always accompanied President Verger on his travels. *He* wasn't quiet, quite the opposite- he was irritatingly loud, a presence that most people wanted to ignore, but couldn't. But quiet surrounded him. It surrounded the Victor's Village when Will entered after his walk with the dogs that day, still forty six days since he'd seen Hannibal. It wasn't just any other day in the Village, a little bit more hushed than usual, it was silent. That seizing silence, one that gripped at his lungs and throat, constricting, paralysing.

It only grew in power as he entered the threshold of the house, ushering the dogs away from the dining room and hanging up their leads, stripping himself of his coat. Things were better now they could afford to officially own the dogs, the at least daily walks gave him access to both exercise and fresh air, which was a blessing if he needed space. Which was a lot, recently.

His mother stood by the dining room table, next to Verger, he eyes wide with fear as she glanced to Will as he walked through the doorway, entirely unimpressed with Verger's smirk and warning hand on his mother's wrist.

“Let her go,” he ordered, careless anger building in him before he shoved it down.

“As you wish,” Verger complied, dropping her arm, gesturing for her to leave. Will had half a mind to confront him about the way he was treating his mother, but he knew this wasn't the time, so he kept his mouth shut and gritted his teeth as he waited for whatever was about to come next. “The Capitol are quite taken with you and Hannibal,” he remarked, tilting his head as if to gauge Will's reaction.

“Good for them.”

“It was a… titillating performance, I must agree.”

“It wasn't for *them*,” he found himself saying, and quite fiercely at that. Verger blinked, surprised, and Will hoped desperately that he assumed Will was upset because their genuine love story was being misinterpreted. Really, he was telling the truth and it *wasn't* for them, but it wasn't due to the objectification of he and Hannibal's supposed love story. It was to *survive*.

“Well, either way, Hannibal's plea was heard.”

“What?”

“'Some way to visit each other',” Verger reminded. “Your Capitol interview? Well, public opinion is quite adamant. And we've decided it would be wise to give them, and you, I suppose, what you wanted.”

“What are you saying?”

“The President is arranging a date for you and Hannibal.” The world seemed to roll to a stop. They had barely kissed *two months ago*. A *wedding* date? Set *already?* This entire thing was happening too fast, and Will was helpless to stop it, to do a thing about it. He wasn't *ready*. “Next weekend, in fact.”

“You want us to get married *next weekend?”*

Verger burst out laughing, and Will felt another pang of loathing toward him. This was all just a game to him, right? Their future was a laughing matter, something to entertain the public and amuse the President. Their future was apparently occurring *next week.*

“Just a *date,”* Verger clarified. “Not a wedding. A date. Am I correct in saying you turn seventeen next weekend?”

“Oh.” *Oh*. His head ringing with the shock of it all, he couldn't even chastise himself about it. He'd really thought… “You'd be correct.”

“Well, we've consulted with Hannibal, and he's perfectly happy with the idea. He'll be taking the train up here next weekend and you'll… *date*.” With that, he seemed to be satisfied, springing to his feet, bounding over to him, seeming to make for the door, before grabbing his arm in the same squeezing grasp he'd held his mother in, leaning over to whisper in his ear. “Don't forget, there'll be cameras. Keep up the good work.”

'Good work'. 'Performance'.

They still hadn't convinced Verger in the slightest.

Chapter End Notes

I hope this doesn't come across as too defensive but my last few days haven't exactly been fantastic and after some certain responses to this fic i feel as though i need to say: please read the tags. This fic is slow burn. The hannigram isn't actually all that far away, but it's still a little bit of a wait, and I assumed you all knew that going in. I have worked hard on this and while you are perfectly entitled to hate it or disagree with the way I write, please remain respectful- that's all I ask.

That being said, I hope those who are enjoying the fic like this chapter! Your comments are appreciated a great deal and I'm really looking forward to sharing what I have next with you all.

Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Barely two minutes after Verger had left, he was up and out of the house, poking his head around the door to check if Verger and his team were really gone before making his way outside, through the entrance to the Victors Village and out into the District. Molly wouldn't be expecting him, but his heart was still pounding and his mouth was dry, his brain urging him to keep going until he reached the edge of the District, one of the hills by the sea, just before the forest: her family's little cabin.

He knocked, desperation pouring out of him like blood from a wound, adrenaline coursing through his veins. When she opened the door, he kissed her like a man starving. He kissed her like he wanted to kiss Hannibal, all fire and frenzy and fury. He didn't think he'd ever kissed her like this before. It wasn't necessarily a bad thing, like he didn't care about Molly or something, because he *did*, but it was just… the way he wanted them was different. Because he did *want* Molly, of course he did, he wanted her by his side underneath the stars and he wanted her smile and her eyes and her pretty hair. But he could have Molly.

He couldn't have Hannibal.

Not in the way he wanted.

He squeezed his eyes shut and tried not to imagine him as he wound his hands around her, breathless, yearning. She was beautiful in her own special way, in all the ways that Hannibal was not. Where he was dark and composed and unreadable, she was a bright undisguised source of light, an open book with *I love* scrawled all over the first page. Molly loved lots of things. She loved the sky and the smell of old books and the way his hair got even curlier when it rained. He didn't really know what Hannibal loved. Murder? Confusing Will? Hannibal was a mystery and Molly wasn't. Neither prospect was better than the other, not in theory, but… he *loved* Hannibal. His heart ached just thinking about him.

Hannibal, for all the ambiguity Will saw him with, was most certainly not thinking about Will. That was one thing he *did* know.

After, swept up in the warmth of each other, she pressed a hand on his naked chest and looked up at him in that way girls did, that knowing look that held exasperation and irritation because he'd done something idiotic or ridiculous. He found that he got that look a lot, and knew it was less to do with the women he had in his life and more to do with the fact that he really *was* an idiot, sometimes.

“What's going on?” Molly asked softly, and raised an eyebrow when it looked like he was about to deny any knowledge of what she was talking about. “I'm serious, Will. What was that? I'm not complaining, but… it's never been like that. So… urgent.”

“I don't...”

“Please,” she whispered. “Please don't play dumb. You've barely spoken to me for *weeks*, let alone *touch* me. And now all of a sudden, you can't get enough? I'm not a *complete* fool. I know something's on your mind. I'm fine leaving it be if you really need that, but if it's affecting *us*...”

“You're right,” he admitted. “I'm sorry, it's just hard, is all.”

“I know. I'm sorry too. Is it...” He saw something flash in her eyes, a dangerous, powerful surge of emotion. Jealousy. Possessiveness. “Is it about Hannibal?” He didn't need to reply, he saw it in her face as he tensed and held his breath in response. She knew. It was blindingly obvious. “What-”

“We kissed,” Will mumbled, stopping her sentence short. “They made us kiss. We're official, or whatever. Word of mouth will take what happened in District One to the Capitol, and… yeah. It's already started.”

“Okay,” she uttered, accepting, encouraging. “Anything else?”

“Verger just visited.” He watched her eyes grow wide in response, the pressure of her hand on his chest increasing ever-so-slightly. “He's… organised a *date*. For me and Hannibal. Like we're properly together.”

“And that… upsets you?”

“It makes me realise. Within the next few years, tops, we'll be married. Probably forced to live in the Capitol. Their little pet couple, or something.” The contempt in his voice was rising, seizing his chest, constricting and liberating at the same time. “What then?”

“I don't understand.”

“What about us?” He had to fight to keep the pain from his voice. “Where are we, then?”

“We're...” She sighed, deeply and sadly, only now realising. Realising that he was *right*. “We're not together, are we?”

“I always thought we'd have longer, and I know you believed that too. But we don't have very long at *all*. It's already started. There could be a media circus here *tomorrow*, for all I know. Or now, even. We're seen together, and then everything is blown. Not only are my family then in danger, but you are too. I don't know how long we have, Molly,” he murmured. “Not very long at all, I'd suspect. We won't be able to hide it anymore.”

“You're breaking up with me,” she acknowledged, tone bordering on accusatory.

He couldn't really blame her. It was a horrible situation, lying in bed next to one another, recently intimate but now so far apart. The quiet conversation had shattered, and now all that remained was painful comprehension that this was the last time they'd ever get to be like this.

“I think that's for the best,” he managed, voice tight and heart aching, a little bit. It was a shame. He had very nearly loved her, had been so close to getting there. Without Hannibal in

the picture, he could quite genuinely see a future with her. A marriage. A kid. A whole host of dogs.

But that wasn't the case. Hannibal existed. His existence was unavoidable.

“There isn't any other reason you're breaking up with me?”

He wanted to tell her. To admit that Hannibal had become something *more*, lately, a source of frustration and desire and infatuation. He *owed* her that, and he knew it. But the words were stuck in his throat, unyielding and humiliating. Most of all, guilt-inducing. He had technically had an emotional affair with another man while they were still together, and he felt terrible about it. She deserved to know, but he couldn't quite bring himself to tell her.

“No,” he lied.

“Nothing else to do with Hannibal?”

She didn't know. She *couldn't* know. But still, yet again, Hannibal's name from her mouth made panic kick in and impossibilities scurry through his mind like the minnows in the river he would watch so very often. It was silly, because there was no possible way she could've found out. He hadn't said a word to anyone about his developing feelings for Hannibal. Or was he really just that obvious? She'd barely *seen* them together, so was she able to work it out from just the way he spoke about him? Did he really have it that bad? It was more morifying than he'd previously thought.

But her face was patient and free from mocking, so… maybe she didn't know. Not for sure, anyway. She could just be inferring, and he could deny inferences. So he grit his teeth and smiled at her, sad and sorry, a farewell. A mask.

“No.”

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“You *broke up with her?”* Bev exploded once he told her, halfway across the District later that day, in the open airiness of her room, the same too-large atmosphere that all the rooms and the houses in the Victors' Village. “*Why?”*

“I'm officially dating Hannibal now, Bev. There'd be *hell* to pay if Verger found out about Molly. He could have her *killed*.”

“So don't let him find out about her!”

“It isn't as easy as that! He has eyes everywhere. I can't risk it. I can't risk *her*.”

“I thought she was good for you,” Bev muttered, sinking down beside him on her bed, shaking her head. “I just want you to be happy, Will. I thought she made you happy.”

“She did. She does. That's why we can't be together.”

She sighed, saddened but understanding. Of course she understood. They had to do what was necessary to protect the people they cared about, and if that necessary thing was for him to distance himself, then it was for the best. She knew that, and he knew that, but it didn't make it hurt any less. Bev looked up at him, pity curling her expression, sorrow threatening her eyes.

“Did you love her?”

He barely had to think about it.

“Nearly.”

“I'm so sorry, Will.”

“I'm an asshole,” he rushed out, groaning and throwing his head into his hands, ashamed. “I lied to her. I was breaking up with her, and I *lied* to her. What kind of person *does* that?”

“An asshole,” she agreed, placing a tentative hand on his back, further up than where Hannibal would comfort him, but close enough that it both helped and hindered the guilt he felt. “What did you lie to her about?”

“Everything.” She didn't probe, just waited, seeing if he would admit it to her or not. It was probably for the best- he rarely reacted well when pushed. “About Hannibal,” he specified reluctantly, embarrassed.

“Okay,” she prompted, soft.

“I think I… have feelings. For him.” He had to force it out, the words so shameful his tongue didn't even want to speak them. He felt vaguely ill, light-headed and sickened at what her reaction would be to his admission of guilt that he'd loved Hannibal while dating Molly, as he pulled his head up from where he'd been using his hands to hide it. He was beside himself with self-loathing, with crippling anger and disgust at the way he'd treated her, whether it had been subconscious or not. He saw Bev go to open her mouth, ready to say something, but he interrupted. “I know how ridiculous it is. I know I shouldn't have done that to her. I know I'm an asshole. You don't need to tell me that.”

“I wasn't going to say that at all,” she reassured, looking slightly upset that he'd even suggested it. “Sure, it wasn't fair. But… you couldn't help it, and you didn't string her along. You broke up with her. You did the right thing.”

“I strung her along for weeks.”

“You were deciding what to do. You still *liked* her. You still like her now, it's just...”

“I like someone else as well? Yeah,” he scoffed, filled with self-deprecation. The silence lay thick and heavy between them, a little bit bittersweet. As much as he hated himself for doing that to Molly, he felt as if he had to find some way to justify it. “I really did break up with her because of the Verger thing, you know. The Hannibal thing was just a part of it. I lied about

that, though. She asked about him. *Specifically*. And I denied it to her face. Immediately after breaking up with her."

"Will… It happens. This is the first proper relationship you've had. It *happens*."

"Does that make it *okay?"*

"No. But don't feel so terrible about it. Please. Just… deal with the other problems you have right now."

"Like Verger?" he asked, and she stiffened, swallowing, before nodding. It was hard to acknowledge the danger of it, the power Verger held over them, the control. He was terrifying, really. And he was the biggest problem they had by far. "Like Hannibal?" He couldn't help but try it. She hadn't really responded to his confession about Hannibal, since he was more occupied with the Molly situation, but he wanted to see how she reacted now.

Her face didn't change except for a quirk of her lips- amusement? "I don't think Hannibal is really a *problem*."

"How? I have to *marry* him and I… feel like that." He was still having trouble admitting it out loud, saying the dreaded word 'love'. That was far too real. That was game-changing. He wasn't ready for that, not in the slightest.

"I wouldn't worry too much about feelings," Beverly murmured, hand resting warm and weighty on his spine, grounding. "It's less complicated than you think."

He hated the way people acted around him, nowadays, especially when he brought up Hannibal. They got all avoidant or cryptic, and it drove him crazy. He never bothered asking anymore, though, because what would be the point? This had happened enough times for him to know that he wouldn't be receiving a straight answer anytime soon, so all he could hope to do was not end up at this point in a conversation with people.

Because whether it was complicated or not... people? They certainly made it so.

Chapter End Notes

fun story: thank GOD for confirmations because I accidentally clicked the orphan button for this series literally two minutes before posting

Chapter 12

When Hannibal stepped off the train it felt like the coming of spring: the air was new and crisp and the sun felt just a little bit brighter. The utter relief and joy he experienced at the sight of him was nowhere near as blinding as it had been at the start of the Victory Tour, when it had been six months since they'd seen each other and the future wasn't as bleak, when Will had *needed* him, had practically fallen into his arms at the heady explosion of emotions. Six weeks was a fraction of how long he'd waited before, and therefore a fraction of the elation and the yearning and the saccharine reunion.

“Back already?” Will joked as they came together with a short embrace, while as nice as it was, was mostly for the cameras.

“I couldn't keep away.” It made him laugh for real, if only a little. His huff of amusement was cut shirt by the gift Hannibal retrieved from his pocket, a tiny thing, a box that was small enough to fit in the palm of his hand when Hannibal gave it to him, pulling away from their hug. “Happy Birthday,” he murmured, low and hot and close.

The box was a dark and shining wood- beautiful, really- but that wasn't what Will was focusing on. He'd seen a box like this, only once, a long time ago. He'd been nearly twelve, his birthday in less than a week, and come barrelling in from school one afternoon, so fast and thoughtless he'd knocked his mother to the floor, from where she'd been attempting to leave through the same door he was entering from. Her bag had hit the floor, contents spilling, mostly clothes but a little box, too. It was small like this, though perhaps not made from the same wood, and it had rolled to Will's feet.

“What's this?” he'd asked, after apologising and helping his mother up, bending down to retrieve the box. His mother's face had fallen, surprise and embarrassment and deep sadness.

“It's… an old heirloom.”

“You're selling it? Why?” It had been in her bag of clothes, the ones she mended for people and gave back to them for a cost. His twelve-year-old brain couldn't quite understand the correlation between them and an heirloom.

“We're a little low on money now, that's all. It'll be fine. This'll fetch us a decent price.” She'd moved to snatch it back from him, but he'd opened it, seeing the reflection of a pretty ring staring back at him. It wasn't fancy of course, nothing like those diamond-encrusted bands he'd seen around the fingers of people in the Capitol, it was simple and overwhelmingly the sort of ring he'd seen in the Districts, but he instantly preferred it. Simple as it may have been, it had feeling, it had *effort*, the real stuff, that wasn't concealed by flashy riches.

And he'd recognised it.

“You used to wear this,” he had said, confused. She'd sighed.

“Your dad proposed to me with this ring,” she'd explained, and he'd been hit by a fresh wave of loss over his father. “Money is low right now, and your birthday's in a week. It's fine, Will.”

Along with the loss, came the frustration. Frustration that things were like this, that his mother had to sell a ring his *father* gave her, so *he* could have a good birthday. But he'd been tired of being frustrated. This was their situation. There wasn't much they could do to change it. So he'd shaken his head, determination clutching him for perhaps the first time since his father had died all those years ago, the first emotion he'd felt that wasn't sorrow or emptiness or anger.

“You aren't selling this,” he'd promised her, and signed up for tesserae the day he turned twelve, no gifts, just a looming future of possibilities, the increased likelihood that he'd one day be the District 4 tribute in the Games.

But it hadn't been tesserae that had led him to the Games, in the end.

He stared down at the box in his hands, so similar in size and shape to that one he'd caught his mother with all those years ago, still half-trapped in Hannibal's arms, and felt sick. Was this a proposal? It certainly didn't make sense if it *was*, as he'd expected it to be a big public spectacle with fake tears and Hannibal down on one knee, presenting the ring openly. Not *this*, a sweet exchange of a gift on the platform. He hoped his gut feeling was wrong. He wasn't at all prepared for the publicity surrounding their *wedding*.

“Where now?” Hannibal asked, eyes roving around his face, maybe seeing Will's apprehension.

They ended up on one of those picnic benches on the hills by the beach, past where the market stretched out for half a mile, a quiet little spot that was known for being especially romantic at night. It wasn't at night, and there were a few people crowded on the other benches, but it was nice enough. Their knees were brushing under the table and the sun was warm on his back. It was only really ruined by their knowledge of the cameras that were hidden somewhere, supposedly as small as the ones in the arena had been.

“Why don't you open it?” Hannibal prompted, nodding at the box still tightly grasped in his hands.

“It's not a ring, is it?” Will asked, stupidly blunt but too worried to care. Hannibal smiled.

“No,” he assured. “I don't think we're quite there yet.” He paused, frowning a bit. “I'd expect your girlfriend would have a lot to say about an engagement.”

“We broke up.”

“Oh,” he said, face registering the words and frown smoothing out, biting his lip in an absent-minded way that was so unlike him. “I'm sorry. I apologise if I had any part in that.”

“It's okay,” Will reassured. “I blame Verger. Not you.”

Hannibal nodded, understanding. His eyes weren't as dark as usual in this light, the pale blues of the sky and the royal blues of the sea, the beige sand on the beach. They looked *brown*, painfully ordinary and painfully human. They were open and fond and they made him look *young*, younger than he actually was, and Will couldn't tear his gaze away, could only smile back and loosen his panicked grip on the box.

“What am I supposed to get you for *your* birthday?” he questioned, sly. Asking when Hannibal's birthday was felt too much like a *real* date, which wasn't what they were doing. They were faking it for the cameras. But… Will still felt as if there was so much he didn't know about him. He was just too awkward to ask.

“That's already passed, I'm afraid,” Hannibal answered. “About a month before the Victory Tour. You'll have to wait a while.”

“That doesn't seem fair.”

“Is any of this?”

That shut him up. He'd been pretending, acting as if this was all okay, like this wasn't a forced step on their journey to forever together, a fate they didn't choose. He'd forgotten this wasn't all about how terrible *he* felt about it. Hannibal was just as trapped as he was. He could only be thankful they'd been forewarned there was no audio, otherwise even their *conversations* would need to be false. But Verger must've thought they'd slip up somehow, so decided to tease the Capitol through only a visual. Perfect.

“No,” he agreed. “No, it isn't. I just… don't like owing people things.”

All of a sudden Hannibal grinned, toothy and uncontrollable, those true smiles that Will occasionally coaxed out of him and felt warm when he did so. It felt like catching him off guard, like forcing him to show himself, vulnerable and naked, the true man behind the monster. It wasn't his closed-mouth smiles, because as real as they could be, they could also be fake. Hannibal had never been able to grin for something fake. That was always true.

“You said that to me before,” Hannibal said, smile still sweeping his mouth. “When we first met.”

“I don't think I remember that,” Will admitted after casting his mind back, coming up empty.

“I remember it well,” Hannibal replied, eyes far-off. “You taught me how to make fishing lures.”

Will could only watch as he got a hold of himself again, swallowing, eyes clearing and darting back to Will. He glanced down at the box again, subtle encouragement, and Will shook his head at Hannibal's impatience, unwinding his fingers from around it and placing it on the table. He clicked it open.

Inside lay a sculpture of a stag, tipped on its side, antlers curling up and curving from its head. It was made of some shiny metal, and was only a few inches tall when he held it between his thumb and forefinger, lifting it up to the light. He felt Hannibal's eyes on him,

but couldn't school his face from open-mouthed surprise and slight confusion. It looked expensive, like one of those Capitol trinkets that cost people fortunes, but despite the fact things like that were usually impersonal, it made his throat go dry. This wasn't impersonal at *all*. He *felt* it.

“I had it made at the blacksmiths,” Hannibal offered. “I wanted something… personal.”

“It's a stag,” he said, merely acknowledging it. “Why a stag? I mean, I love it, it's great, *thank* you, but-”

“It reminded me of us,” Hannibal explained, smiling at his rushed thanks. “Of you.” He stretched a hand across the table, brushing Will's, voice catching as if he was about to say something else.

“Of everything you could be.”

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“I've never seen the sea before,” Hannibal remarked, hours later, as darkness began creeping over the horizon and the moon started emerging from behind the clouds.

They had moved away from the rest of the couples on the hill, the ones who were *actually* in love, so it could be just them, sitting cross-legged in the cool sand. Will loved it here. He didn't come often, seeing as it was a long walk from the house, but being this close to the sea was calming. The rhythmic crashing of waves was always a nice thing to hear in the background, especially now, during the early stages of night. He felt untethered from reality, in a special place between living and dead, hyper-aware of the smell and sound and sight of the sea, the feel of sand grains drifting past his knuckles.

“I love the sea,” he whispered back, rapt as he gazed at the endless blue. “I can't imagine having lived a life without it.”

The idea of it, of Hannibal having never seen the *sea*… it was unthinkable. Shocking. He lurched to his feet, kicking off his shoes, much to Hannibal's seeming confusion, frowning as Will shrugged off his jacket. Then came the top, pulled over his head and haphazardly strewn to the side. Hannibal's eyes were wide as Will's hands moved to the button of his trousers. Will didn't know why he was so alarmed by it, it wasn't as if he was stripping off his underwear *too*.

“Will...” His voice was breathy, raspy. Maybe that was the sea air- he'd never really experienced it, after all.

“Come in with me,” Will suggested. “You'll like it.”

Hannibal looked unable to refuse.

The water was freezing cold, but he liked to think living in District 4 had acclimated him to that kind of thing. He heard Hannibal gasp as it reached his waist and he laughed, turning to see him shivering in the deep water, glaring at Will. In the damp and the dark, he seemed

completely diminished, nothing like the ethereal beauty Will had once both feared and revered. Admittedly, when Hannibal wasn't looking back, he still felt like that sometimes.

“This was a terrible idea,” Hannibal said. “I'm *cold*.”

It made Will laugh harder, wading over closer to him, accidentally sluicing the seawater further up his chest with the movement, causing him to recoil, hissing in discomfort. He was tempted to do it on purpose, but felt a little bad at Hannibal's extreme reaction to the cold water, so refrained, instead feeling his breath catch as Hannibal drifted into a patch of moonlight. He wanted to take back everything he had thought before. The ethereal beauty was back, full throttle as he stood, other-worldly and breathtaking, in the white light of night.

“You get used to the cold,” he whispered, aware of the thin layer of tension between them, fragile and breakable. His eyes were caught on Hannibal's form; it was shining, glittering.

“One can get used to a lot of things,” Hannibal spoke, words uttered like they meant a thousand things, a thousand things Will didn't know, a thousand things he didn't understand, and he desperately wanted to.

Will waded over, crossing the now-short distance between them, not in control of his urge to be closer to Hannibal, his warmth and his intense stare. There were mere inches between them before Will stopped, skin on fire at their burning proximity. The water may have been cold, but Will had never felt hotter; their vicinity scorched his throat and made his heart smoulder like smooth alcohol.

“Our 'marriage'?” he asked, wondering if that's what Hannibal had been implying with his vague statements.

“Perhaps.”

Perhaps. It wasn't a real answer. But Hannibal did that. He'd either answer things fully and properly or not at all, and Will was left to piece together whatever he might have meant. The air sang between them, hot and heavy and inescapable, and Will felt like he was choking on it, on arousal and tension and fierce attraction. All he could do was focus on Hannibal's face, determinedly not glancing down to where the water stopped between his waist and hips, parting in waves that splashed gently against his skin.

Hannibal's gaze bore into his, and neither of them tore their eyes away. Neither of them spoke. The atmosphere was eggshell, pulled taut between them, the moment like a quivering breath, an exhale that never ended. The air was wobbling and suffocating sea-salt. It was intoxicating.

They stood there for what seemed like hours, simply looking at each other, world spinning around them, night shifting later, sky growing darker. Will's heart was a rocketing beat in his ribcage. Hannibal's eyes were a starless sky, juxtaposing the twinkling light above them, sprinkled across the molten darkness. Love uncurled in him, a starving beast of impatience.

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His bed now wasn't as narrow as it once was, certainly, but it was smaller than the one they had shared on the train. It seemed absurd to assume that the decorators of the train had been preparing for them specifically, but it was the only explanation Will could come up with as to why. They were tangled around each other almost dangerously in this bed, uncomfortable and nearly hanging off the sides. But Will couldn't bring himself to care. They were still mostly undressed, hadn't been bothered enough to cover up after their dip in the ocean, and the still-damp bare skin of Hannibal's chest was pressed all along his back.

They were stuck together. Anything could happen and Will still wouldn't move a muscle. This was too perfect.

“Today was fun,” Hannibal murmured into his drying curls. His breath fanned across the nape of Will's neck. “I hope they start letting us do this more often.”

“They will,” Will said, a realisation. “This is what the Capitol wants. They'll let us do this. They *want* it.”

They smelt of testosterone and sweat and salt. Will was drunk off the smell of them, heady from the understanding that they'd be doing this, doing it for a while. They'd be seeing each other, *often*. Hannibal was a part of his life. He could scarcely believe his luck. But it was down to them, really- they deserved *some* credit. The gift. The almost skinny dipping. The way they had stood, for ages, virtually naked, only inches apart. Gazing into each other's eyes, passion springing between them like a blooming rose, red and thorn.

With the moon above them, the cameras would've picked it up. The Capitol would've seen. That, at the very least, would buy them another date. Some more time together.

His heart jumped as Hannibal's hand slipped down his flank, curving precariously over his hip before catching his hand, intertwining their fingers. Will could still feel the trail of his fingers along his skin, a line of heat that nearly left him gasping. Their hands fit together as well as their bodies did, nestled together like puzzle pieces on his bed. He could already tell he was going to sleep better than he had in months.

The sky was lightening outside the window, late night shifting into dawn through the sheer curtains. Birds had begun to sing their morning song, a sweet melody for them to fall asleep to. A melody almost as sweet as the sound of Hannibal's breathing and the muffled creaking of the bed if they moved, the sounds of *them*, the sounds of life. Hannibal's toe tickled along his ankle, his knee moving to bracket Will's thigh, legs entrapping him further. Will could swear, as sleep started to swirl across his brain, that he felt Hannibal's lips touch his skin, the swell of his shoulder: a lingering kiss.

But Will couldn't be sure.

He was too drowsy and too infatuated to be sure. But it didn't matter, because he knew what he wanted, now. He wanted this. Forever.

He wanted sunlit conversations and late night swimming and the phantom brush of Hannibal's mouth on his skin.

Chapter 13

Seeing Hannibal interacting with his family was a fantasy he hadn't really been aware he'd had. But it was there: dormant, waiting, heart jumping when it came true. Will dreamed, sometimes, late at night, when darkness blanketed him and hid his shame, that things were different. He dreamed that Hannibal was born here, that they met as children or teenagers or adults, but they were friends, just like they were always meant to be, just like they were *supposed* to be. And things would be different. Easy. *Simple*. He'd never have to worry about the future, *their* future, and he'd be free to pine for Hannibal without false reciprocation, false hope, the Capitol's cruel torment that endlessly teased him, keeping the wound fresh and stinging and wanting. Then… this. Hannibal and his family. A full picture. All of his life, all the people he cared about, together. It all flashed through him in an instant, seeing Hannibal pouting at lightly toasted bread, engaging in conversation with Abigail and his mother like he'd been doing so for years. Will wanted it. He wanted this.

But, of course, it was impossible. It meant change from the start, and they would never get that. They just had to work with what they had now, like good victors and model citizens of Panem. It was hard, it hurt, and it had Will imagining up scenarios that would never come to pass, but it was all they had. When it came to spending time with Hannibal, he'd take what he could get.

The drive to the train station was different to last time. Last time, the Victory Tour had been ending, and everything had been so unsure and bittersweet, so sensitive. They hadn't known how many months, or even *years*, it would be before they saw each other again. Will had been clinging onto every second that passed.

But it didn't seem to matter now. Everything was bright, and fresh, and new. The world seemed to bloom with future, with purpose, with endless possibilities. They could *do* this, and it would be fine, because they'd be with each other. There was no way Verger could be unhappy with how they had acted yesterday, and they both knew it. They were high off it. Well, with himself, he had to factor in that it really had *felt* like a date, that nearly naked in the water with Hannibal and pressing their bare skin against each other had been *good*, almost like they were actual romantic prospects for one another. He'd been delirious at the mere memory of it all when he woke up this morning. He was high off *all* of it. Off the future it had secured, the joy it brought him, and his empathy picking up on Hannibal's happiness.

Maybe feeling high had made him brave. Maybe it had made him careless.

Maybe it hadn't done either. Maybe he was just aware of how delicate this thing with Verger was.

Whether it was courage or fearlessness that made him grasp at Hannibal's waist when they hugged goodbye, leaning up to murmur “I think you should kiss me” in his ear, he didn't know. All he knew was that it was, without a doubt, the right move. Benefits for him: he'd get to kiss Hannibal again, he was helping Hannibal, and this would make Verger's supposed approval of them more secure. Benefits for Hannibal: he'd look better to Verger for initiating

the kiss, and it would make the chances of him visiting District 4 again more likely. There were no disadvantages, except for Hannibal's likely uncomfortable reaction to having to kiss Will.

He certainly *seemed* uncomfortable at the words, tensing in Will's embrace, shivering a little as the suggestion ghosted the shell of his ear in a breathy rush. Will heard his teeth clack like he was gritting them, felt the lack of relaxation from his muscles, picked up on the ridiculous amounts of thinking that Hannibal was going through right now. Something was wrong. Will really hoped the idea of kissing him again wasn't that repulsive, that it was related to the cameras or Verger or something. Will also hoped he explained what was going on fairly *soon*, since the hug was lasting a near-suspicious measure of time, and it was going to be incredibly embarrassing if he outright *rejected* Will, especially after a few minutes of considering it.

“No,” Hannibal said, voice a steady refusal. Will felt sickening despair sink in the pit of his stomach. “I won't kiss you. Not now. Not for them.”

He pushed Will away, hands clenched on his shoulders, determination and desperation etched into his expression, eyes fire and fury. 'Them' was spoken with such disgust that it all came rushing back to him, the revulsion at the Capitol, at their idealistic, ignorant view of the Games and the Districts. He felt Hannibal's ferocity in him, the steadfast darkness of his eyes as he gazed at Will, some great, trembling meaning balancing between them, fraying by the second.

“Do you understand?” he asked.

Will could only gaze at him, confused and enthralled.

He nodded, and Hannibal smiled, soft and quietly thrilled.

But as the train swept Hannibal from District 4, leaving nothing but a rush of wind and a new collection of memories behind, Will thought to himself that he didn't, in fact, understand.

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The surge of violent and stinging hatred directed at Verger was stronger than he'd remembered it to be. Perhaps it was because now, he was pretending. Verger was a smiling and sweet President, bounding across the stage and being cheered on by the crowd, nothing like the menacing figure that had sat in Will's dining room the other week, towering over him with masked threats and the deadly weapon of fear. Just how naive the Capitol was to who he was and what he was capable of was mind-blowing.

Hannibal's visit had nearly made him forget what tonight was: the announcement of the Quarter Quell. On his *birthday*. It felt predetermined. It felt *suspicious*. But he was probably just being paranoid- he had done his time in the arena, and now was the first Games after he'd been guaranteed as safe by becoming a victor. Everything would be fine, and he would get to sit this one out the way he used to, watching children scramble around on screen in a desperate need to survive, and try not to weep for them. Now, even more so. Now it would be harder. He'd understand the helplessness, the pain, the terror, the death… he'd understand all of it. And the fact that it was a Quarter Quell this year… he couldn't begin to imagine the

horrors the Gamemakers were planning to inflict, or the special twist that would make it that much worse for the Districts. He pitied the upcoming tributes already.

Waiting for it was horrific. There was no longer personal stake in the outcome, disregarding Abigail still being eligible for reaping, but all it did was draw attention to the emotions below all that distress, the sympathy and the sorrow and the *anger*; the utter fury that this was his life, that this was the life of so many children across Panem, while a lucky few sat in their ivory towers eating off golden plates, consuming their misfortune for sport. The loathing had likely been there the whole time, during every reaping, but the trepidation and panic had been all he was able to focus on, terrified that he'd be the one reaped. Not anymore. This year, he knew. He was aware of all of it, of how desperately he despised Verger, how deep it ran.

He hadn't really thought about killing since the Games. Not about killing someone new.

Verger certainly tested that.

“Are you nervous?” Abigail asked, hand brushing against his on the floor, where they sat at the foot of the couch.

“Why would *I* be nervous?” he questioned. “You're the one at risk. Although not that much,” he added hastily, mind flashing to what a wreck she'd been last year, more frightened than he'd ever seen her.

But she only smiled, shaking her head. She was different now, and it upset him a little. It felt as if watching him in the Games had matured her- he'd returned home to a baby sister who was suddenly all grown up. It was because of *him* and he hadn't even been there to see it. He supposed her not being scared anymore wasn't a bad thing, but it was just one aspect of who she was now, which was someone he wasn't quite sure he recognised. Watching him nearly die everyday must've been hard, he imagined.

Looking over at her, there was a calm in her expression he'd never seen on her before. Like she'd already accepted her possible fate. She was even more composed than he had been, almost a year ago now.

“I'll be fine,” she said, staring at Verger prancing around on screen. “Either way. I'll be fine.”

“Don't say that,” he spoke sharply. Maybe a little too sharply. She glanced at him, seeming slightly shocked at his reaction.

“Sorry,” she murmured, and he only sighed in forgiveness, clutching at her hand on the floor. This was not the time to be arguing.

It was hard to register anything that happened on screen before the envelopes were finally brought out, yellowing with age and curling at the edges, drawn out by Verger's sure, smug hands. And Will could see it in his face: the smirk, the quirk of his brow as he drew the card out, the faux surprise. Will could see it in his face and he could feel it in his stomach like a sinking rock.

Something was wrong.

Not for them, but for him. He truly could be in trouble.

Verger glanced up, gaze straight to the camera. He began to speak, and everything was white noise for a few seconds.

“-the male and female tributes will be reaped from their existing pool of victors.”

Existing pool of victors.

Bile rose in his throat as he lurched to his feet, head spinning, heart pounding. Verger was still talking, and he felt Abigail grasp at his leg, but he stumbled away, moving until he was tumbling through the door and feeling cold air sting his cheeks. He didn't feel any less sick. He couldn't distract himself from the churning mix of dread and anticipation, a swirl of emotion in his stomach, in his throat, so he kept walking onwards, eyes smarting at the freezing wind. He was shocked, of course, but there was a part of him that had known. A part that had known seconds before that there would be some retribution for the past few months, and his flat romance with Hannibal that only the most idealistic Capitol citizens had believed.

A part that had known since that first night with him and Hannibal, in the Games, after his breathless and furious rant at the Capitol. It had been a mistake, one that had led him here. And Verger letting him survive had been an equally terrible mistake- one that he was rectifying.

Because yes, while there was obviously no guarantee that in District 4 he would be reaped, as the amount of victor options were far vaster than that of the outlying Districts, there was already something off about the Quarter Quell taking tributes from the existing pool of victors. This was on purpose. He seriously doubted that it had been planned this way for the better part of a century, despite the fact that there was no evidence to suggest the contrary, and if his suspicions were in any way correct… then it didn't matter if there were a lot of victors to choose from. He'd be re-entering the Games whether he liked it or not.

And this time, he wouldn't be leaving.

There were trees around him before he knew it; he'd walked miles without even realising, and the moon was now creeping out from behind darkened clouds, a ghost from the night before when he had stood, opposite Hannibal, in deep, lust-filled waters. The trees were everything he had missed for the past few months.

He didn't miss them anymore.

And Hannibal. He hadn't even thought of him. Did this set up include both of them? All three of them? Or was it simply for him and his terrible acting? He didn't quite think he could handle the idea of fighting for his life while knowing Hannibal was watching back in a cosy room in District 1, probably fearing his fate. Then again, Will supposed, it was better than having Hannibal there again. He was certain that Verger would not let them get away with having multiple victors again. That was a one off, and it wasn't the way things worked anymore. Nothing was working anymore, not really, not to their favour, at least.

He and Verger had been playing a cat-and-mouse game, but that was over now. Will's luck had run out. The board was Verger's, and all the moves were his.

Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Where's your head today, Will?” It was Jack. He'd slowed to a stop, looking over at where Will had stilled, seconds before him. “You can't seem to focus.”

It's at the reaping, he thought, *tomorrow*.

Being outside in general usually helped clear his head, especially running, which he had tried to take up recently in preparation for his likely return to the Games. Jack had started joining him about a month ago, just in case it was him, and Will found it nice to have some company. Company that wasn't his best friend of seventeen years, wasn't a romantic interest, but still understood the trauma of it all. He had no interest in connecting with the other victors. There was no point. Either he or one of them would be in the arena soon, within the next *week*, to be exact. What use would there be in making friends?

“Sorry,” he replied, breathless. He could feel the sweat beading on his forehead, trickling down the side of his face like a teardrop. In all honesty, he couldn't remember the last time he'd really cried- not while awake, anyway. Not since those dreadful nights before the Games, really, a whole year ago now.

“Stop getting so caught up in your head,” Jack recommended. “Forget about tomorrow.”

“It's really not that easy...”

“I know,” Jack admitted. Will was about to respond flippantly, like a *real* teenager, the one he had been prevented from growing into, but Jack cut him off beforehand. “Trust me, I know.”

It was guilt-inducing. It was hard for him, of course, to get barely a year free from the Games, but Jack had been free for *decades*, and now he was expected to stand by while he was threatened with the return to his darkest nightmares. The only thing worse than having to go back to the Games after a year was having to back to the Games after *multiple* years, living a full life before being dragged back into it by Verger and the rest of the Capitol.

Although… at least Jack had got to live his life.

Will would be dead before he hit eighteen.

“I didn't mean...”

“I know what you meant,” Jack said. “It's alright.”

It wasn't. It hadn't been alright for a while. But Will simply smiled and nodded, and started running with him again. He was glad for the crisp morning air, making him more alert and pricking up his senses. He hadn't really felt awake for the past year, walking through life half-dazed and drowning, lost in the confusion and opportunity of choice, until recently- the

Games. As much as he despised it, deeply and desperately, it gave him purpose. A deadline. If he was going to die soon then there wasn't any use in wasting what little life he had left.

Everything felt urgent these days, like time was steadily ticking away and everybody knew it. He noticed the pitying looks they gave him at school, by the river, at the market. It could be him. It probably *would* be him. And now he *knew*, had to wait months to actually get there, the end of his life creeping closer like sand in a timer. The looks only made it worse, people he'd never even talked to glancing at him with deep sadness but also a kind of wild relief that he'd feel every year during reapings, and see on the other children's faces. It was a gutting, feral rush as the fear alleviated, leaving people gasping and reeling. Other boys his age, when they looked at him now, it was only that. It was *thank god it's not me* and *thank you,* like he was doing it for *them*, like he had a *choice* in this. He didn't want this anymore than they'd want it to be them, potentially even *less*. He'd done his time. He'd done his part for the Capitol. Never in the history of Panem were victors ever forced to go back in there, the President usually wouldn't *dare*. Technically the Capitol could do whatever it wanted with them, but they were untouchable by the Games, at least.

Apparently that trend was over.

And he knew it would be him. It was no mere coincidence that this challenge came the year after three victors emerged from the Games, three victors that were either underwhelming, rebellious, or too mysterious not to be dangerous. Verger regretted the lifeline he'd thrown them last year, and this was the only way he could take it back. Will wouldn't put it past him to meddle with the envelopes, switch them or replace them in some way. Nobody would've stopped him. Which meant that nobody would stop him tampering with the names drawn out for the reaping, tailoring it so that the paper pulled out would announce that the tribute was Will, believe it or not. Shocking.

He wouldn't be surprised if Beverly was reaped, and Hannibal too. They were just too big a threat to Verger to be left alone; they'd made a royal mess of things after the Games and had clearly not done enough to convince people of their dewy-eyed romanticism and innocence. And it had cost them their lives. There was no way he or Bev would emerge victorious if they were in the arena with previous victors, old and weathered some of them may be, they knew how to kill better than those tributes from a year ago. They had stared death in the face, and won.

Neither he or Bev stood a chance, and even for Hannibal... things didn't look fantastic.

All Will could do was hope that Hannibal didn't have to go in there- Verger seemed more focused on Will than he did Hannibal, anyway. So maybe Hannibal didn't have to go back, maybe Verger wasn't visiting him for a reason, was leaving him alone because he was *doing as he was told*, unlike Will and Bev. The tiny chance of Hannibal staying safe was one of the only things that had kept Will going this long, and if Hannibal didn't turn up at the Training Center tomorrow, it would be one of the only things seeing him through the pre-Games phase and even the Games themselves. Thoughts of Hannibal would be his token, this time.

As long as Hannibal weren't there in the flesh, he'd be satisfied.

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Quarter Quell reapings were vastly different to that of the reapings for the normal Games. Will had watched replays of the previous Quarter Quells, and he could always feel the tension, more so than usual. The stakes were just *higher*, and it was *noticeable*. It was tangible, and even more so now he was actually *here*. It was different, though. There weren't as many of them at risk this year, and the pity screaming on onlookers faces was another blow to the stomach, another reminder that they were safe and he wasn't. He stood with a small group of potential tributes, with Jack next to him. The stag sculpture Hannibal had gifted him was clenched tightly in his fist, no doubt leaving indentations in his palm. If he looked across, he could see Bev, head bowed, staring down at the ground, dazed and despairing.

She refused to look up. He could see her hands were trembling where they were clasped tightly behind her back. They hadn't really spoken much lately, and in an instant he regretted all of it. Once the news of the Quarter Quell had broken, she had folded in on herself while he'd gone outwards. He'd barely come home, creeping in during the early hours of the morning, sleeping until noon and then leaving immediately after. Sometimes he'd go running, and lose track of time. Sometimes he'd sit catatonic in the forest, unable to drag himself home in time for dinner. In contrast, Beverly had locked herself away, rarely seeing the sunlight for the past few months. And now either one or both of them would be shipped off to the Games, sent to death row.

They should've made the most of it while they still could. While they were still alive.

It had all happened too fast, which was part of the problem. The last few months had flown by, days blurring together so that when he looked back it seemed like no more than a week. A tiring, monotonous week. Even now, it felt like Freddie was speeding through the opening of the reaping, that her words were coming far too fast, and his fate was too close. He didn't listen to a word, but they were still racing in his ears, along with the beating of his heart. He didn't hear anything until a shocked gasp rushed through the crowd of citizens, a wave of whispers, a shock to his system. He glanced around in confusion, unaware due to his selective hearing,

And then, Beverly.

Beverly shifting past the few women grouped with her, heading towards the stage, face filled with resignation and despair. For a moment, she glanced up, meeting his eyes. They were empty, hollow. No fear, just broken acceptance. Will felt a pulse of pity, but more so, a familiar pain and a familiar guilt. It was happening *again*. His *best friend*, the same best friend who he had *promised*, looked straight in the eye and vowed that he would never let her die alone, not in the Games. He had fulfilled that promise, technically, and done it well. He had assumed that he'd never have to do it again, up until a few months ago. The benefit of winning the Games wasn't fame and glory and riches, shallow prizes that children from the Districts didn't care about, it was a guarantee that they would never have to go back. Now that was gone.

Of course, he had known of the possibility that they were both going back in. But it hadn't quite hit him until now, watching her walk back to death the exact same way she had a year ago, only more defeated this time. She was less reluctant as she made her way on stage and

stood next to Freddie, who had an odd expression of detached confusion on her face. Reluctance had meant an unwillingness to die. She had been unwilling last time.

Not anymore.

There was no point in fighting, not now. Look what Verger had done to them. Look at what he was capable of. The one fate that victors were able to escape, and that no longer existed- Verger was formidable. Unstoppable. They didn't stand a chance against him and they certainly didn't stand a chance against a crowd of previous victors attempting to kill them. Will could scarcely imagine the dangerous people that would end up re-entering the arena, characters who had gone down in legend and history throughout all of Panem, people like Georgia Madchen and Clark Ingram and Francis Dolarhyde. Killers. Murderers. Only the strongest would prevail, and that surely wasn't Beverly. It wasn't Will either, but he knew, again, he'd have to return. By choice or by chance. He wasn't the strongest by far, but he was strong *enough*. Brave *enough*. Enough to step forward and hear his voice ringing in his ears after Jack's name was called to be the male victor, hold his head up high as hundreds and thousands of eyes swivelled to stare at him, some shocked and others unsurprised. There were even more gasps, the sound of the sea, gentle waves crashing through the crowd and smashing against the beach, the rocks, the stage.

Freddie looked even more pitiful welcoming him on stage, voice quiet and face creased in internal conflict.

“I'm sorry,” she whispered as he passed by her, crossing to stand beside Bev, chin lifted and jaw clenched to prevent any trembling. He couldn't respond, but he wouldn't know how even if he could. What would he say to that? 'So am I'? 'No you aren't'?

He met Abigail's eyes in the crowd where she was standing amidst his acquaintances, people he knew and would never see again, shaking like a leaf. There would be no goodbye. He was under no false pretence that this was like last time, that he would be allowed the same privileges, such as seeing his family one last time before he died. Her eyes were wide and pained and blue. She was, for a moment, that little girl he'd left behind last year, his tiny sister with her timidity and shy smiles. A part of him had wanted her back, but not like this. Never like this. He wanted to shout out to her, to mouth something, say something. Smile at her, at least. But he didn't. Couldn't. Wouldn't. He was on camera, and he'd have to keep up appearances. The appearance of stoicism and acceptance, like he wasn't falling apart at the prospect of going through all of that again, and this time, not escaping. *Dying*. Never seeing her eyes again.

He carried the image of her gaze in his mind like a token as they were being herded away, off the stage, past the justice building, and into the sleek black car as expected. He carried it as they were sped to the Capitol on an even sleeker, more colourful train, towards people would be unaware of the sliver of hope he still held, a tiny bud of a flower, tucked in the pocket of his heart.

A wildflower. A bluebell. Humility, gratitude, and everlasting love. A bouquet just for him.

Chapter End Notes

Not a huge shocker, I know, but I felt as if I had to write a transition for Will to return to the Games. I'll try and get the next chapter out soon!

Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"*I volunteer.*"

It was surprising how two simple words could mean impending doom. How they could affect him so *viscerally*, rip him up inside and fill his eyes with the bitter sting of furious tears. There was an endless pit of rage and helplessness churning inside him as he let himself be plucked and prodded and primed, made to look pretty and shiny for the Capitol. Again. It was all far too familiar: the walls, the people, the *emotion*. He was trapped, defeated. Just like before. Because he'd *done* this, he'd *been* here, raw and pink and fresh, being dressed in pretty blue clothes and preparing to ride through the city on a chariot built from fallacies and conspiracies.

This time, in some ways, a *lot* of ways, it was worse. He was invested now. Settled. And it was all being torn away- everything and *everyone*. He was so *angry*, because it was all so *unfair*, so cruel and so hurtful. It wasn't that he regretted his decision to follow Bev in here, because he'd made her a promise, and he planned to stick to it. Granted, he'd made it when he was twelve years old, but that didn't make it mean less. It didn't take away from the fact that he loved Beverly, and was going to do all he could to protect her, and if that didn't work out, be with her at the very least. But still… he wasn't exactly looking forward to *dying*.

And that wasn't even half of the pain. He thought he'd be allowed to die alone, had deluded himself into thinking that the universe would be a little bit fair. He'd been a fool.

It was all he could think as they were ushered into the Remake Center with the other tributes, perhaps the oddest cluster of tributes ever. They weren't tributes, though, not really. They were *victors*. They'd suffered and fought and *won*. They shouldn't be here. None of them should. It was tangible in their scarred and tired faces: unimaginable pain and barely-hidden fury. For most of them, this was a death sentence.

There were a few who seemed just as confident as young Career tributes, however. Not in that same youthful, carefree way, but in a sense that they weren't terrified like everyone else. They stood tall and sure, surveying the rest of the tributes like they were already in the mindset of a killer. They probably were. But it was surprising, considering that a lot of these people *knew* each other, and were even friendly. Not anymore, he supposed. Will even recognised a few of them from previous recordings of Games, peering around at each other with a morbid curiosity and dread that they weren't even trying to disguise. Recognising them was all he had to go on, since he hadn't listened to nearly the entirety of the reaping that was played to him on the train. It was hard to concentrate once his entire world had begun to crash down around him, heart thumping with wild horror, stomach turning at the worst words he could've heard.

"*I volunteer.*"

Amidst the chaotic, bustling crowd of victors, his eyes sought out the person he'd been fixated on since they'd volunteered so valiantly to return to the Games. Hannibal was just as steely-eyed as Will when his gaze met his across the room, jaw clenched and posture stiff. He was still, like a predator about to pounce, alert and focused on Will. Anger bubbled up in Will, white hot and hurting, and it was all he could do not to shake under the weight of it. *I'm a fool,* he thought, couldn't *stop* thinking it. Bev's hand clutched his arm, trying to calm him, but it wasn't enough. It couldn't be enough. Nowadays, the only thing that could calm him down was the soothing press of Hannibal's hand on his back. He wasn't even sure *that* would do the job at the moment.

He crossed the room in a few short strides, trying to ignore his awareness that he was making a scene, meeting Hannibal with a forceful shove to his chest, sending him stumbling backwards in genuine surprise. Will didn't have the chance to catalogue the expression on his face before the words came exploding out of his mouth.

“What the hell were you *thinking?”* he exclaimed, words filled with venom to mask the pain. “Volunteering? *Really?”*

“*You* volunteered,” was Hannibal's answer, more snappy and bitter than Will had ever heard him.

“That was *different!”*

“*How?”*

“Keep your voices down,” Beverly hissed, coming to stand beside them, having made her way over with much less vigour and speed than Will had.

“I volunteered because of Bev,” he retaliated, ignoring her, too caught up, too upset to even register her words. “I had a *reason*. You just *volunteered*, Out of *nowhere*.”

“It wasn't out of *nowhere!”*

“Yes, it *was*. You didn't have anyone you were trying to protect!”

“I have *you*.”

For the first time since the train, the rampage of wrath raging inside him stopped short. Watching the replay of the reaping, and watching Hannibal step forward to volunteer in the place of some other District 1 victor, had ignited a fire in him that had felt impossible to quell. He'd felt *betrayed*. One thing that he'd wanted, if he really had to come back here, was the idea of Hannibal, home, *safe*. It was all torn away, in a second, and he didn't understand *why*. Hannibal wasn't that same arrogant teenager he'd been a year ago, bored and bloodthirsty enough to volunteer. He'd *changed*. Will had thought so, at least.

Unless... he *hadn't*. That was the only explanation Will had found fit the situation. Hannibal was the same as he'd always been- he had no regard for anything and anyone, including himself. He just wanted to revel in the murder and chaos he ensued wherever he went. But now, his justification seemed to contradict Will's original hypothesis.

“What?” he asked, a whisper, confused and intrigued.

“I volunteered for you.”

“But you had no idea if I'd get reaped.”

“I know,” Hannibal admitted, a tight smile gracing his face.

Will didn't have any time to process his words before Bedelia was marching over, stony-faced and unimpressed. She placed a hand on Hannibal's shoulder, and as innocent as it looked, Will could see that she was white-knuckled and fuming.

“The best we can hope for is that this doesn't get back to the public,” she spoke under her breath, voice taut. “The last thing they want to hear is that Panem's sweethearts are having heated arguments backstage.”

Her meaning was clear. If they were to have disagreements, they would need to be private. Not a spectacle, like this had very much been. It was mostly Will's fault, considering he'd initiated it, but they'd *both* been shouting. And he simply didn't think he could manage to hold it in, so struck with sorrow and frustration at the sight of Hannibal and the possibility that any of that stunning vulnerability he'd displayed to Will recently wasn't *real*. Now he was just reeling, completely thrown off balance by Hannibal's odd confession. Will truly couldn't make sense of it.

As Bedelia turned, Hannibal in tow, Will snatched his hand, spinning him back slightly. There was a frantic bewilderment in his movements, and he had a reckless need to comprehend what Hannibal was saying.

“What do you mean 'you know'?” he blurted out, tinged with desperation.

Hannibal stared at him, realisation dawning on his face, eyes widening, brow creasing and mouth turning down at the edges, a disappointed pout. He breathed in, deep and quivering, and closed his eyes momentarily. They were dark and sad when he opened them again.

“You nodded,” he murmured, voice heavy. “You nodded when I asked if you understood. But you don't, do you?”

There was a pause that lasted a lifetime.

“I'm sorry,” Will mumbled.

Hannibal let himself be dragged away by Bedelia.

***

When Will crept into Hannibal's room that night, adrenaline still pumping from the chariot ride through the city, Hannibal was half-asleep. It was the first time it had ever happened when Will came to see him, and he was ridiculously endeared by the tiny hum of surprise as the bed dipped with Will's weight, the drowsy eagerness that he sat up with, and the way his hair was mussed and his eyes were low-lidded in the dim light. Will crawled up the bed like

the animal he'd always seen Hannibal as, less angry and more blinded with affection, moving until their foreheads knocked together, a bump of pure fondness.

He sighed, and knew his breath rushed over Hannibal's mouth.

“I'm sorry I don't understand,” he whispered.

Hannibal pushed at his side, gently urging him onto his back, beside Hannibal in the bed. He turned onto his side, facing Will. “It's okay,” he replied, voice still sleepy and slow.

“Did you really volunteer just in case I was reaped?”

The silence in the room was answer enough, but Will wanted to hear it. So he waited as Hannibal collected himself, linking their hands and letting his fingers dance through Will's.

“Yes,” he conceded, seeming a little embarrassed with the way he hid his face in the pillow. “I couldn't risk it.”

“Risk what?” Will asked lightly.

“Having to watch you in the Games. Not having any control over whether you lived or died. Being helpless.” Will was hit with a wave of inexplicable adoration, powerful enough to tighten his chest and make his eyes sting. He clung on tight to Hannibal's hand, stilling his fidgeting fingers. “I couldn't bear it, Will. Not being able to prevent something from happening to you… I couldn't bear the thought of it.”

“So you volunteered,” Will croaked out, tears blurring his eyes. He nosed into Hannibal's exposed neck, letting his tears fall against the warm skin there, wriggling into the familiar cocoon of Hannibal's arms.

He'd thought Hannibal had volunteered for play. For *fun*. He couldn't have been more wrong.

“I'd do anything for you,” Hannibal uttered fiercely, after pulling his head up and pressing their foreheads together again, words no longer muffled by the pillow, but spilling into the small space between their mouths. “Name it. I'd do it.”

“Don't die.”

He felt the air shift and knew Hannibal was smiling in the dark.

“I have no intention of dying.”

“Good,” Will responded, grinning in return.

Surprisingly enough, they didn't untangle from one another, and stayed wrapped up in the warmth and devotion of each other, hands still clasped together. Hannibal exhaled, and Will felt it brush his skin, making his arms break out in goosebumps, nerves singing Hannibal's praises. He'd missed this. The longing he felt when he was this close to Hannibal hurt *more*, in some ways, but it was also *better*. Free to *touch,* like Hannibal wasn't some great, celestial being that he had no chance of being near.

“We gave the other victors quite the performance earlier,” he remarked, uncharacteristically blasé and unsubtle for Hannibal.

“Well I'm sorry for embarrassing you,” Will replied, a little guilty. “I was just… overwhelmed. Angry that you willingly came back here.”

“So did you,” Hannibal argued sharply. “Technically.”

“That's *different*.”

“Is it?”

“I'm not going to argue with you about this,” Will snapped. “It's *different* with Bev. It just *is*. I don't know how to explain it. But this was anything but willing, trust me.”

Hannibal's jaw tightened, but he swallowed, relinquishing. “Fine,” he allowed. “I just worry how the others will see it.”

“Well if they see us as weak, isn't that an advantage? Element of surprise, and all that.”

“Maybe,” he pondered. “I just worry that if they think any of the emotion we have for each other is real… they might be able to use it against us. Use it to manipulate us in the arena. I think most of them assumed our friendship was simply for the cameras, but now...”

“Oh,” Will realised. “Oh no.”

“It isn't too bad. They have weaknesses too.”

“Like?”

“Dolarhyde, for starters,” Hannibal suggested. “His girlfriend was reaped with him.” He paused, casting his mind elsewhere. “Bernardone. Ingram was reaped too, and you know the allegations he was making a few years back. It drove him half-mad.”

“No,” Will said, remembering Bernardone's skittishness and timidity, remembering how he'd never fit in among the other victors, and had even made a big fuss about a Capitol-favourite, Clark Ingram. The media had *crucified* him. “Don't target Bernardone.”

“You feel sorry for him,” Hannibal observed.

“He's not like the others. He's...”

“I understand. I won't bring him up again.”

“Thank you.”

There was still some anger in him, certainly. He wasn't any less hurt that Hannibal had volunteered so impulsively, but at least now he had an idea of *why*. Understanding, though, was another thing entirely. There was some great, heavy truth that Hannibal wanted him to realise. But he wouldn't *say* it, which made everything so much more *confusing*, Now was the

worst possible time for him to be confused- he had to be focused. He had no idea what was about to happen, or what he was about to experience. He assumed it would be similar to last time in many ways, but was under no false pretence that he would have any chance predicting it. Last time was child's play compared to this. These were victors, *professionals*, and he was an amateur, nothing more.

But then he felt Hannibal raise his head, lips moving to touch his temple, just like they'd touched his bare shoulder all those nights ago. A kiss. Not for the Capitol. Not for them.

Whatever was to come, they had each other. That was all Will needed.

Chapter End Notes

I hope you like the chapter! Hannigram grows closer by the day <3

Chapter 16

Skill, apparently, wasn't a popular feature among previous victors of the Games. It was interesting, seeing as Career Districts were so hellbent on fostering it in their tributes, that most victors weren't skilled. They won by luck, intelligence, or viciousness. Will could see it across the room: Peter Bernardone, dodging around the weapons' stations. That had been luck. Georgia Madchen, painting away at the camouflage station. That had been intelligence. And then, Francis Dolarhyde, hand clasping around the hilt of an axe. He had been vicious. He wasn't skilled. He was considered to be perhaps one of the most fearsome victors in history, yet he hadn't won due to his dexterity with weapons or disguise, or due to alliances with Careers. He'd won with brute strength. Madness and violence had been his only allies.

“Would you say he's our biggest competition?” Will murmured to Hannibal, as they stood near the wall of the gymnasium, surveying the area.

“Who?”

“Dolarhyde.”

Hannibal huffed beside him, almost *amused*. Will glanced at him to see his gaze pointed at Dolarhyde, who now had the axe squarely resting in his palm where he was shifting it, testing its weight. They watched as he swung his arm and let it fly, sailing through the air with a whistle and embedding itself in the last ring of the target, far from the centre. A miss. He didn't seem to care, however, simply remained expressionless and rolled his shoulders back in menacing preparation. He snatched up another axe.

“He's not just competition,” Hannibal said. “He's a threat.”

“They aren't the same thing?”

“Not here. Not with them.” Hannibal brushed his thumb along the tender flesh of Will's wrist, and tingles electrified up Will's arm in response. “Competition diminishes what they are.”

Will could only nod in reply. Hannibal was *right*- they were so much more than competition. Tributes like Dolarhyde, like Ingram, like James Gray… these were cold-blooded killers. The aftermath of the Games hadn't broken them like everyone else, they still stood tall and proud, *confident*, smirking like they were having the time of their lives. They could *easily* win, and they knew it. And it helped that the public *loved* them; he and Hannibal might have been currently popular, but the victors returning to the Games were household names. They'd been pillars of Panem and representatives of the Games for years, *decades*. Will, Hannibal and Beverly, as beloved as they were at the moment, paled in comparison. They wouldn't win the Games through power and they wouldn't win them through sponsors. They wouldn't win them at all.

***

“Good grip.”

Standing at the knife-throwing station and hearing an unfamiliar voice behind him seemed to be a trend in his life. Though he expected whoever it was probably wouldn't turn out to be his future husband this time. Though… he and Hannibal would no longer be destined for marriage, he supposed.

“Thanks.” He turned to see that it was Madchen, smiling down at the hand he had clenched around the knife. Hannibal had taught him how to do this, a year ago to the day. He barely remembered the contents of the faux-lesson, only the warm brush of Hannibal's breath on the nape of his neck and his hands hot on Will's flank. His 'good grip' came from muscle memory and instinct.

“I used knives.”

“I remember,” he remarked. “So did I, on occasion.”

“I remember.” There was a wisdom to her words that could only have come from a victor or an elder. There was a weight there, an exhaustion, one that people only spoke with if they were very old or mature before their time. She looked older, too, despite barely brushing twenty in age. Dark circles cast shadows of history underneath her eyes, and her hair hung down her back lank and unbrushed, in that worn-out way where she couldn't bring herself to care.

She spoke like it had happened a century ago, when it had only been a year.

“Will you use knives this year?”

“What would be the point?”

It stumped him a little, and he raised a questioning eyebrow at the comment. She only smiled that tired smile she'd had since before she'd even entered the Games, moving closer and drawing one of the knives from the rack. She held it up a little, as if to examine it, and ran a finger along the blade, only stopping when she reached the point. He watched as she pressed her finger down and then released, staring at the little bubble of red that emerged as a result, perhaps the only colour in the monochromatic room of grey, black and white.

“I'm not going to make it out this time. I won't delude myself into thinking I have a chance.”

“That kind of negative perspective isn't the best way to go in there,” he advised, and she shrugged, seemingly already defeated. “I have to say, I respect your realism.”

“And I envy your hopeful youth.”

“I'm not hopeful.” She cocked her head, prompting. He sighed. “I believe the same as you. I just hesitate to say it out loud.”

“Smart.”

She still held the knife out. The drop of blood had trickled down past her knuckle, and more red rose up in its place, a blooming rose. Finally, it splashed onto the floor. Nothing happened. He didn't know what he'd been expecting- exile? Blood in here seemed too *messy*

for the Capitol. That was saved for the arena. That was saved for the tributes. The Capitol could never dirty itself with such savagery.

He felt her eyes shift away from him, drifting across the room to where Ingram and Bernardone were engaging in heated conversation, Ingram towering over a cowering Bernardone. Will could almost hear his terrified stutter from here. How anybody could believe that Bernardone was a psychopathic murderer was beyond Will. Ingram was clearly the one more capable of murder.

“Do you believe all that stuff Peter came out with the other year?” Madchen asked. “The stuff about Clark?”

Madchen and Bernardone had a few things in common, really. Well, one thing: the Games had affected their mental health fairly seriously. Madchen had gone temporarily insane during the Games, as many tributes did, and it had helped her win. She'd been practically feral when she came out, and they'd had to postpone any interviews for *weeks*. Nobody really knew or understood what had happened, and there was probably a better explanation than 'she went temporarily insane'. Bernardone hadn't killed *anyone*, had even struggled killing animals to live off, and basically holed up somewhere until everyone else had killed one another off. The only action he'd gotten was the sight of the finished massacre when he wandered blindly toward the Cornocopia for the hovercraft to pick him up. It was then, about fifteen years ago now, that the Gamemakers began manipulating the landscape to push tributes together. They didn't want another fluke victor like Bernardone, especially since he ended up so unstable. It was likely he'd already struggled with his mental health, and the pressure of the Games had forced him to breaking point. All the drama with Ingram had only made it worse.

“Yeah, I do believe him. Don't you?”

“It's so easy to blame the vulnerable,” she said, and her tone was soft. “Of course I believe him. Have you ever looked Clark in the eye?”

“I'm afraid not.”

“It was definitely him. We all know it. I may not have been a victor as long as the others, but Clark has always disturbed me. He's too…”

“Stoic?”

“Yeah. Too stoic. Too composed. Any lack of stoicism he *does* show seems completely fake. I don't know...” She trailed off, look drifting further, to Beverly and Hannibal. Will didn't know whether to be pleased or offended that she was teaching him how to make lures. “Hannibal reminded me of him a bit. During the beginning. Before you came into the picture.”

“I can see it. They're similar. But Hannibal's more...”

“More in love? Yeah, I doubt that's ever been on Clark's mind.”

“You actually believe that stuff?” Will offered, taking Hannibal's advice. He probably should've consulted Jack, but Hannibal's worries were pretty relevant. The Capitol should believe they're in love, sure. But why should the victors? They could use it against them if they truly believed it, so it was best that they *didn't*.

But Madchen just smirked. “You're both quite convincing,” she explained.

“...Thanks.”

She placed the knife back on the rack, hand stained slightly scarlet. He could taste the metallic tang of her blood in the air, permeating his gums, lying dormant on his tongue. In some of his harsher nightmares, he'd be licking blood from Hannibal's skin, or trailing a knife down his chest, feeling him writhe below him. Okay, maybe they weren't nightmares. It didn't make them any less frightening, though.

He bid goodbye to Madchen, deciding to rejoin Bev and Hannibal where they were crouched over some fishing lures. As he navigated the clumps of victors at certain stations, he heard snippets of the conversation Ingram and Bernardone were having. Ingram was assuring Bernardone that he was just confused, that he must be mistaken, that Ingram was worried about him. It made Will's blood boil and his fists clench. Their dynamic reminded him of that between Budge and Franklyn, oddly, where there was such a clear and disconcerting power imbalance. Sometimes he felt that he and Hannibal were like that, and then Hannibal would suddenly go all soft and awed when Will did something as simple as eating or smiling or *breathing*, and then Will wasn't so sure anymore. They were now more on equal footing, most days.

“What did Madchen say?” Bev inquired as he sunk down beside them.

“Not much. Stuff about knives,” Will shared, and Hannibal's mouth quirked at the blunt nature in which Will said it. “Some stuff about Bernardone.”

“He looks like he's arguing with Ingram,” Bev observed. “Did you overhear?”

“A bit.”

“Was it about the murder thing?”

Will shot her a look. “Of *course* it was about the murder thing. What else would it be about?”

“*I* don't know. Training?”

“Why would it be about *training?”*

“Okay, that's enough you two,” Hannibal intervened, sounding like an extremely put out mother. “Does it really matter? This isn't really a situation for *gossiping*.”

“Sorry,” Will mumbled. He noticed Hannibal was struggling with the lure, and gently took over where Hannibal was stuck. “Why are you making *lures*, anyway? Didn't I teach you last year?”

“Yes, I believe so,” Hannibal agreed, feigning ignorance as he watched the movements of Will's hands.

“So why are you...”

“I… forgot.”

Will stopped fiddling with the lure and looked up at him, mock hurt on his face to meet Hannibal biting back an embarrassed smile. He flicked the lure at Hannibal's face, who chuckled, not at all seeming apologetic. Will supposed he couldn't blame him. It was useless information that he'd shared a very long time ago. They'd been through a lot since then.

“Stop flirting,” was Bev's only input, and Will did his best to shut up, downplaying the besotted smile that threatened to spread across his face. He'd sorely missed this seamless rapport he had with Hannibal, an element of their dynamic that had flourished the minute they'd come into contact with one another.

He happened to glance up to where Madchen was, standing at the opposite wall, speaking in hushed tones with her mentor. Instead of focused on the conversation, however, her gaze was flicking between he and Hannibal, her smirk from earlier having grown in size. He could tell from her expression that she hadn't believed his leading question that suggested their relationship was fake. Her face clearly stated that she saw what he and Hannibal had as *real*. He was simply worried about what she might do with that information, whether it was true or not. It *wasn't* true, but it didn't mean that they didn't care about each other. If any of the other victors had an understanding of that, it would be dangerous- the children from last year might not have been clever enough to use it as a weapon.

But these were adults.

They knew better than most that emotions were weapons, *weakness*, and they could be used as such. Will would have to watch his step.

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“Are you going to keep up the pretence about you and Hannibal, going in?”

It was a surprising question- one he hadn't anticipated. He hadn't thought far enough ahead to even consider his actions in the arena. A part of him had assumed he might die within the first few hours, during that fateful and deadly massacre by the Cornocopia. If he did survive, what then? Did he still play along with what Verger wanted? *Why?* He didn't owe him anything, and Verger was basically setting a death trap for him.

“I hadn't really thought about it. Probably not,” he answered, and Bev frowned in response. “Verger can't hurt me with anything else,” he elaborated.

“What about Abigail?”

His heart dropped like a stone. He hadn't thought of that. Of *course*: the one thing that Verger could always hold over his head, which he had incidentally forgotten. His family. It meant

that he wouldn't be able to cling onto a single shred of dignity, not even as he was forced to death. This act with Hannibal would have to remain, right until the end. Or Verger would undoubtedly take it out on his sister.

A deep, despairing sigh escaped him. He'd lost hope, and that was terrible, of course. But he'd been losing a tiny sliver of hope every day since the Quarter Quell announcement, or maybe even that first reaping. He knew what it was to lose hope. He could cope.

“I suppose we will keep up the pretence, then. I only hope Hannibal's alright with it.”

Beverly barked a laugh, shaking her head at him. “As if he'd disagree.”

“I don't know. I don't know what's going on in his head half the time.”

“You probably know better than most,” she pointed out.

“There's still so much I *don't* know, though. There's something he wants me to understand. Something about why he volunteered for me? I just can't quite...”

“Connect the dots?” Bev volunteered. There was a peculiar expression on her face, almost *smug*, like she had something over him. It wasn't an expression that was entirely rare, she often wore it during conversations about Hannibal or any other time Will was being a dense idiot. Which embarrassingly, wasn't rare either.

“Do you *know* something?” he asked, unsure whether to be offended or not.

“Know what?” Her voice was a suspicious octave higher, quivering like it was balancing on a laugh, and the way she ducked her head, letting her hair swing forward like a curtain to block her face, was telling. She knew *something*, even if it wasn't what he wanted to know. But he knew better than to push, and simply rolled his eyes and flopped onto his back from where he'd been sitting cross-legged on the bed. She was far worse with impatience than he was- playing a waiting game wasn't a hardship for him. She was more likely to give in than him, just because she was so desperate to explain. She'd tell him eventually.

“Did you talk to any of the others today?” he wondered aloud.

“Ingram. Briefly.”

“What did you think?”

“His eyes were dead.”

“And that means?”

“I don't know. I didn't like it. I didn't like him.”

“Understandable,” he admitted. “Madchen said she thought he was too stoic.”

“I can see her point.” She paused for a minute, fingers scratching at the raised stitching pattern of the bedsheets, the building atmosphere of solemnity solidifying between them. “Do

you think he really did it? Murdered all those girls?"

"I'm almost certain. It's his word against Bernardone's, and I know everyone believes him instead, but… the way he…" He struggled to find the words.

The scandal that had emerged about a decade ago had shocked not only the Capitol, but all of Panem. Sixteen Capitol women, murdered, one of whom was rumoured to have been in contact with Bernardone, who's mind had already been slipping. Sixteen Capitol girls, murdered at sixteen separate intervals, precisely during events that victors were invited to. They had all assumed it was Bernardone, who'd vehemently claimed it was Ingram. Nobody had believed a word. But Verger had pardoned him, much to the shock of the Capitol, showing mercy to the Districts and its peoples. He'd been commended for his grace, Ingram had been pitied, while Bernardone had become a pariah everywhere he went. Will felt deeply sorry for him, but also a strange sense of kinship, despite the fact that they'd never spoken.

"I don't like Ingram," he finally came up with, floundering. He felt *angry*, angry that Ingram had done this and gotten away with it, had blamed it on someone innocent and undeserving of any pain. It wasn't fair. "I just *don't*. There's something *off*. His eyes, his stoicism… whatever it is, it doesn't matter. He's not *right*."

"It's okay," she murmured, lying down beside him, winding her hand into where the fabric of his shirt bunched around his elbow. "Go to Hannibal."

He blinked.

"What?"

"You go to Hannibal when you're like this. You go to Hannibal when he's here."

"I'm sorry, Bev. I never wanted you to feel like I was abandoning you, or-"

"Don't be stupid. I know it isn't like that," she explained, her tone good-natured. "You make the most of what you get. And you need him. I understand completely. Now go to him. I know you want to."

"No," he whispered. "I'll sleep here tonight. With you."

The smile that graced her face was one of utter softness, and the warm familiarity of familial love.

Last time, on this first day of training, he'd dreamed of Hannibal, his hands and his eyes and his voice. This year, it was Madchen's tired smile, Ingram's dead stare, Bernardone's scared stammer. And behind them, there stood a great red dragon. No skill, just brute strength.

Chapter 17

“Where were you last night?” Hannibal asked in the morning, petulant. There were dark smudges under his eyes. “I waited for you.”

“I was with Bev. Sorry.”

Hannibal sighed, shaking his head. “It's okay. Just… tell me next time?”

Will swept a finger along Hannibal's wrist, and smiled up at him through his lashes. It was coy, just the slightest. Hannibal smiled back, the corner of his mouth turning up and his eyes going a little unfocused, in that way that they did. This close up, they weren't actually that dark. They were a deep, rich brown, glinting off the fluorescent lights of the gymnasium. Will was reminded inexplicably of that night at the beach, warmth radiating off Hannibal's body, how his eyes had been overflowing with that unknown emotion the way they sometimes did, and the inability they'd both had to look away from one another. This moment felt a little like that, just scaled down. The world had seemed to stop around them in that very same way, the din of knives and arrows quieting so the only sound in Will's ears was his racing heartbeat and their breath, mingling together.

It was the noise of a weight falling that finally broke them from their stupor of staring, the explosive sound of it smashing against the ground from where it once sat near the top of the rack. Heads swivelled around to where Bernardone stood, shocked and shaking, staring down at Ingram crouched on the floor, clutching his foot. A couple of medics made their way over, bending beside him and obscuring him from Will and Hannibal's view. Bernardone was still visible, as he backed away, that same terrified expression on his face that he always had.

“Poor Peter,” Hannibal murmured, and Will was on exactly the same page. Bernardone wasn't *like* that. He wouldn't just throw a weight on Ingram's foot, but that was how it seemed. Obviously there was something else going on, something that they hadn't seen.

Sighing, he pulled his gaze away from the group of medics crowded around Ingram, and his eyes met someone else's across the room. Dolarhyde's expression was predatory as he looked between Will and Hannibal. He seemed unaware of the débâcle with the weight, and was instead captivated by whatever Will and Hannibal were doing. Which was staring at each other, coincidentally. So much for hiding the fact that they actually cared for one another. Now Dolarhyde could have an idea that their situation was similar to his and McClane's, which wasn't exactly information that Will wanted their biggest competitor to know. He tilted his head, still watching them, and Will felt Hannibal shift beside him. He didn't need to look to know that Hannibal had noticed as well, and was likely giving Dolarhyde a run for his money in this absurd staring contest. Staring across a room at each other was *literally* the first interaction he and Will had had, so he could imagine fairly vividly what Dolarhyde was seeing.

In the end, it was Dolarhyde who looked away, seamlessly tuning back into conversation with his girlfriend. Will knew that this wasn't over. He would be watching them in the days to

come. He was curious about them, probably, seeing as he couldn't be *threatened* by them. But having the curiosity of a man like Francis Dolarhyde pointed at him wasn't an ideal situation for Will.

“Behold the Great Red Dragon,” Hannibal whispered beside him. “In all his glory.”

***

Francis Dolarhyde had won almost twenty years ago, now. His arena had consisted of perhaps one of the strangest landscapes in the history of the Games: it had taken place entirely inside. The setting had been a large, seemingly endless mansion, perhaps modelled after Verger's one, and Dolarhyde had navigated it effortlessly. He'd become known for displaying his victims, which wasn't unheard of, but the way he'd done it had been *brutal*. The Games had ended within four days, and there had been speculation as to whether Dolarhyde was even *human*. They'd rarely seen him eat or sleep. He'd seemed to only have murder on his mind. Apparently it had become something of a horror story for children of the Capitol- check under your bed before you sleep, or the Great Red Dragon will get you. Don't step on the cracks, or the Tooth Fairy will attack.

People at the time had wondered if District 5 had begun training its tributes, since Dolarhyde had achieved an 11 as his training score and already murdered six tributes within the first day of the Games. But it had gotten clearer that strength and madness were the only skills he had. He was untrained, yet formidable. It happened, on occasion. If it didn't, then the outlying Districts would've had no victors to show, and this terrible mess of a Quarter Quell wouldn't have been enacted. Will would be safe.

He had no doubts now, watching as their training scores flashed up on the screen a few days later, that Dolarhyde would be scoring just as highly as he did last time. Sure enough, after Hannibal's 11, his 7 and Beverly's 6, came a 12 for Dolarhyde. The Gamemaker's intentions with that were a mystery to him, considering that the most Dolarhyde could've done was throw around some weights. Maybe he'd trained up over the last two decades, though his performance over their few days in the gymnasium certainly hadn't suggested that. He still failed to display any real skill within the things he did, and strength seemed to be his only advantage. But as expected, Will had caught his eyes flicking toward him and Hannibal more than once over the past couple of days. Whether it was during lunch or while they were at a station, it was always when he and Hannibal were together. The only time it had happened when he was alone was a few hours ago, when he had stood and walked to his private session with the Gamemakers. Dolarhyde hadn't looked away as he'd passed him, and that primal gaze had been stuck in his mind for the entirety of the session. It made him beyond uncomfortable.

“Will you be allying with Hannibal this year?” Jack asked over dinner, not making eye contact and attempting to phrase it as casual. Bev was deep in conversation with Freddie about the interviews, and Will wasn't looking forward to having this discussion without her. He hated speaking about Hannibal to anyone other than her or Abigail. It was too private.

Will glared in exasperation. “Take a wild guess.”

“Yes?” Jack assumed, glancing up. Will rolled his eyes, the answer obvious. “Okay, I was just curious. We haven't really got a strategy this year, is all. Allying with a Career is probably the best shot you've got against them.”

Probably the hardest and most frustrating thing about this Quarter Quell theme was that it left no room for strategy. Everybody already knew each other, or knew *of* each other, so nobody could paint themselves as anything different during training or interviews. Nobody could pretend to be weak. They were already a victor. There was no hiding anymore.

“I don't think we have any shot against them,” he muttered, almost self-deprecating, but mostly just realistic.

“They have weaknesses, Will. Just the same as the tributes last year,” Jack assured, and Will huffed in disagreement. Jack sighed, putting his fork down and resting his elbows on the table, balancing his chin on his hands. “Don't forget. I know these people.”

“And what *are* their weaknesses?” he shot back. He knew he was being flippant, but there was a fairly large chance he'd be dead in a few days. Jack's words weren't particularly resonating with him.

“For Dolarhyde, its his girlfriend. Reba McClane,” he began, and Will gave him a look as if to say *everyone knows that.* “But there's also his pride. The whole thing with the 'Tooth Fairy'… he *hated* it.” His eyes were a little glazed over, distant. He was seeing it as he spoke. “He values his dignity.”

“As do most people.”

“More than most people,” Jack corrected. “Trust me. As for the girlfriend, she's blind. It shouldn't be too hard to...” He trailed off, clearing his throat awkwardly. He hesitated, before speaking again, soft. “If it's you that… don't make it painful for her. She's kind. She doesn't deserve it.”

Thinking of killing McClane was uncomfortable. She'd won mostly by luck, coming from District 5 a few years after Dolarhyde, and had only really engaged in fighting with one other tribute. It had been just the two of them left, and she'd had to. She'd lost her sight because of it. And despite all that, despite it all, she was *kind*. The way she spoke, the way she smiled, she was innocent. She stood out among the group of war-worn victors that were now in the Capitol. He didn't want to kill her.

“What about Ingram?” he asked, stabbing at the food on his plate.

“Pride is definitely one weakness. Which means Bernardone's accusations are especially distracting to him. I'd also say women, I guess. You know about what happened.”

“You believe Bernardone?” Will questioned, genuinely surprised that Jack of all people believed such an unreliable witness.

“Of course I believe him. We all do. The victors, anyway. He may be unstable, but I don't think he'd hurt a fly. Ingram, on the other hand… did you ever see his Games?”

“I was young at the time. I've watched some replays, though. Was his in the mountains?”

“Yeah, that's his. It was… insane. He was fine throughout *all* of it. Barely flinched when killing someone. Some of the Careers are like that, since they're kind of desensitised to it, but most of them lose their minds *afterwards,* at the very least. Ingram's District Eight, for starters, so he was untrained. Killing was supposed to be completely alien to him. But it *wasn't*. It came easy. And even now, he's grown up okay. Which, as a victor, is… odd. Not one of us trust him.”

“I can see that,” Will admitted, nodding. “Anyone else we should be worried about?”

“Gray, maybe,” Jack said. “Silvestri. Wells. But they aren't exactly the main threats in there. Not in my opinion.”

“Wells is an old man now. I'm sure I'll be fine there.”

“Don't underestimate any of them, Will,” Jack warned. “That's the worst thing you could do. They're all a threat. See it like that.”

“You're right. I'm sorry.”

“I only want to keep you safe. I wouldn't be telling you something if I thought it wouldn't help.”

Will nodded, understanding. Jack's remarks about the other victors remained on his mind as he made his way down to Hannibal's floor, head spinning the words over and over to the point where it felt as if they were permanently etched in his ears. This was stuff he needed to know. *Important* stuff. It would help him survive, if that was even possible, yet it all felt useless. He was grateful to Jack, of course, for this glance inside the minds of the other victors. It helped him *know* them better, which was an opportunity that tributes didn't usually get, but these were veterans. Yes, pride was a weakness for Dolarhyde, but how would that allow Will to kill him? It *wouldn't*. He could make a few snide comments and rile him up, maybe even distract him enough to let his guard down, but when it came down to it, one-on-one, Dolarhyde had the upperhand. He was just *stronger*, not to mention that he had several decades on Will's young age of seventeen. It wasn't like he didn't want this information about them, but he was having some trouble knowing how to apply it.

He stopped short as he exited the elevator, shocked to a standstill at the sight of Bedelia and Hannibal on the couch, speaking in low voices to one another. They glanced up at the sound of the elevator doors opening, and Will felt ridiculously exposed standing there in the still bright lights of the suite, clothed in his pyjamas.

“Sorry, I thought-”

“It's fine, Will,” Hannibal assured. “I know I'm usually in bed at this time, but we were just speaking about the other victors.”

“I just had a conversation like that with Jack,” he admitted.

“Anything interesting?” Bedelia asked.

“Just that pretty much all of them have pride as a weakness and that I shouldn't underestimate anyone.”

Bedelia laughed, a quiet little melody. “Well, that definitely isn't incorrect.”

Hannibal and the other District 1 victor were as lucky as Will and Beverly in the sense that their mentor had known these people a long time. Bedelia had become a victor just two years after Jack, and they both understood these people to a helpful extent. How much of this they could use in the arena, however, was another story entirely.

“Do you think Dolarhyde is our biggest competition?” Will inquired, echoing his own thoughts and Jack's implications.

“I would say it's between him and Ingram, definitely. Probably more likely to be him,” she answered. “He really is impressive. But if you want to go for the jugular, go for Reba. I know that's fairly obvious, but it is the truth. She's his soft spot. If you get to her, you get to him.”

“Jack said something along the same lines.”

“I'm sure he did.” She sighed, rising from the couch and shifting round the coffee table. “Now, I'll leave you two to it. Sleep well. Good luck with your interview tomorrow,” she added, aiming it at Will. They both watched as she stalked up the corridor and disappeared into her room.

“Sorry,” Hannibal repeated once she was gone. “We just got talking and I lost track of time.”

“Don't worry about it,” Will replied, and grinned as Hannibal made his way over from the lounge area, wrapping Will into his arms in an unexpected hug. Nothing all that interesting had happened during training today, so he wasn't quite sure what brought it on. Perhaps the fact that the interviews were tomorrow, meaning that the Games were only two days away now. It was daunting, and time had simply sped away now that he was doing this all over again. Their odd staring match with Dolarhyde had happened *yesterday*, yet it felt like an hour ago.

“Are you nervous about the interviews?” Hannibal asked as he pulled away, leading Will toward his room.

“A little. But… I've done it before, you know? None of this seems as real or nerve-wracking as it did last time. I almost know what to expect. It's the Games themselves we need to be worried about.”

“You're right, of course.” Hannibal began pulling off his shirt once they reached his room, and Will did his best not to look, climbing into the bed and busying himself with arranging the covers. “I honestly don't know...” His voice went quiet. Will was surprised, seeing as Hannibal always had to have the last word, but now he was struggling to find them. His expression was one of honest dread, an expression Will had never seen on him before. “I don't know how we're going to survive. Not this time.”

Will wanted desperately to offer him real words of comfort, but he had none. Instead, he settled for holding his arms out for Hannibal to fall into, cradling him against his chest in a reverse of their usual position. He smoothed a hand through Hannibal's hair, feeling him sigh against his ribs. This was likely the first time he'd been held this way in *years*, and while he wasn't crying, Will wondered if he wanted to.

“Either way,” he offered, “we'll be together.”

Chapter 18

“What about you and Will? Do you think this will affect your relationship?”

Hannibal smiled, bashful, and glanced down at his lap. The lights of the stage made his cheeks look tinted pink.

“I don't think so. Yes, it's a tough situation, and it won't be easy. But we've done this before. *Together*,” he responded, and there were dreamy sighs scattered throughout the audience. “I don't think anything could separate us. Not even death.”

Forget *sighs*, Will thought he heard actual *sobs* after *that* comment. Not that the Capitol being overdramatic was anything new, but it was still a little insensitive. They were more or less the ones sending them in there, and they had no right to get so upset about it. It was *frustrating*.

Despite the sobs being so irritating, it was another reminder that they had some advantages over the other victors. Will had worried that the others were so well-known they'd be preferred, but Freddie had told him that might not be entirely true. He and Hannibal were still fresh in the mind of most Capitol citizens, particularly the younger ones, who may not even know the rest of the tributes. It was an assurance he'd needed, and all they had to do now was play up the romance part. Hannibal was doing just that, and doing it well. Will had to fight off a smirk.

“Wow. Young love. It really is something powerful, isn't it?”

The audience cheered, almost drowning out the sound of the buzzer. Once the din had died down, Chilton thanked Hannibal earnestly and called for the next victor. It was dull listening to Chilton's generic questions about their lives after their last Games and their apprehension about going back into them. There were only so many variations of answers. *Yes, life's been fantastic, I have everything I've ever wanted*. A lie. Life wasn't all that much better than before. *Yes, it's a shame, but I'll try to win.* Another lie. Not one of them was that calm about having to relive their darkest fears and most dangerous nightmares.

But that was the same typical interview that Beverly had to give, fake smiles and enthusiastic nodding and all. She got sympathetic sniffles when speaking more solemnly, explaining the physical therapy she had to go through so she could walk again, about how even now her ankle still hurt, sometimes. The only odd moment was when Chilton asked her if she had anybody in her life, considering her best friend was in such a serious relationship. She laughed it off, assuring him that no, she didn't have anybody like that.

“It's just something I never really got round to,” she explained. “Maybe after. If I live.”

It wasn't odd at all, not really, not to everyone else. Not all tributes her age had found somebody and her answer was a fair one. It was odd because Will realised, throughout all his disasters in relationships, he had never heard Beverly talk about her *own* love life. It wasn't as if she'd never had one. There had been boys before, but that was a few years ago now. A lifetime ago. It was likely she was actually telling the truth to Chilton- with the Games last

year, it made sense that she hadn't got round to it yet. He'd got lucky with Molly. But why not before the Games? It irked him for some reason, and he felt like he was missing something really important. Something about his best friend. Now, however, was not the time to be plagued by vagaries from Bev's interview. Now it was his turn.

As expected, Chilton asked how his life had been since the Games. And then how he felt about going back in. The usual questions.

“What about your sister? Did watching you in the Games affect her at all?”

He felt his stomach drop, and hush fell throughout the room. He hadn't expected Abigail to be brought up, nor had he expected the Capitol to care. Ridiculously, he longed for the childish questions about romance that he'd been prepared for.

“Um. Yeah, a bit. She's different now,” he admitted. “Quieter. I have no idea what's going on in her head half the time. I don't know… that might just be because she's a teenager.”

Titters came from around the room, stilling his nerves a little. Abigail was a sensitive subject, to say the least. She was a private matter, one he didn't want to discuss at length with millions of viewers, but he knew it had endeared him last year, so he should've realised she would've been mentioned. His best bet was to play it off for laughs, or direct the train of conversation elsewhere. Talking about Abigail was the last thing he wanted to do up here.

“What does she think about you and Hannibal?”

“She's supportive, I guess. Grateful that he saved my life. They never really got the chance to know each other all that well.”

Chilton nodded, expression pitying. He looked genuinely sad for them, and Will knew if he looked down at the faces of the audience they'd be the same. It saddened them that this could be the last time they'd be watching this great romance unfold. Chilton's face shifted back into that same smug exuberance a few seconds later, proving just how shallow this so called sorrow that the Capitol felt for them really was.

“So, Will. We all saw that date you two had,” Chilton began, tone suggestive and full of good humour.

“You were *filming* that?”

Chilton laughed along with the audience, while Will did his best to force a grin on his face. Smiling up here was a lot harder than it had looked to him as a child, and it was somehow harder than last year. He could be dead tomorrow, after being promised prosperity and happiness for life, only one year ago. What did he have to smile about?

“So, we all thought you were going to kiss during your swim in the sea. Be honest: did you enjoy yourselves once you were free of the cameras?”

It was clear what he was insinuating, but Will knew he wouldn't say it in case any children were watching. People were giggling and whispering and it was all so *embarrassing*, to the

point where he thought he could *actually* feel his cheeks heating up. Sex wasn't something that was really talked about during the Games. Romance was, sometimes, but that was usually a tribute in love with some unseen entity back home. There had been a few incidents with tributes in the past, but he and Hannibal were the first victors to ever have 'fallen in love' on screen. Dolarhyde and McClane didn't count- it had happened after their respective Games, and back in their home District where cameras weren't following their every move. He and Hannibal hadn't been allowed that privilege.

“Sorry,” he stalled, trying to settle on a good answer. All he could think to do was attempt to make them laugh again, swallowing nervously as the buzzer sounded. “I don't kiss and tell.”

The response was uproarious, with laughter that wasn't due to humour, but to shock. He was *teasing* them. The secrecy behind what he and Hannibal had got up to without cameras painted a thousand pictures, and to them, it was *thrilling*. Even Chilton seemed a little delighted at the prospect, grinning and patting Will on the back as he ushered him from centre stage, back to his seat with the other victors. He caught Hannibal's eye as he went, allowing a smirk to graze his mouth as he sat a few seats down from him. Hannibal smiled back, eyes twinkling with mirth. Will had been joking, so it was expected.

But he hadn't exactly been lying.

He remembered, throughout the haze of sleep and headiness of Hannibal's proximity, the faint brush of lips across his shoulder: a kiss.

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“What time are you leaving tonight?” Bev asked. They'd been lying in the dark for almost an hour, just waiting for tomorrow to come. Will was sure it would be similar to the sleepless night they'd endured before their first Games.

“I'm not.”

“What about Hannibal?”

“I told him I'd be here with you.”

“And he was okay with that?”

“*Yes*. I wanted to spend tonight here. He's mature enough to understand that.”

“You don't want to see him before?”

There hadn't really been a goodbye. Will had told him this morning, before he headed back to his floor, that he wouldn't be visiting that night, and Hannibal had cupped his cheek and asked him to give Bev his regards. And then at the interviews, they'd been whisked away before they had a chance to bid farewell. Will had assumed they might get a few seconds here or there. But no, their last contact had been the way their gazes caught after his interview, the sparkle of laughter in Hannibal's eyes and the way his face glowed under the beam of the stage lights. It had been fleeting, and Will had been so greedy for more, unfulfilled and

wanting in that way he always was when it came to Hannibal. He could technically go down there now, just for a minute, and see him one last time. But he didn't need to. If this went anything like last time, then Hannibal would find him. Hannibal would always find him. Perhaps using someone else to track and nearly kill him wasn't Will's *preferred* method, but there was no denying it yielded results. Hannibal would find him. No matter what. What was more important was that he stay close to Bev, stick by her side so that nothing like last time happened. They'd gotten lucky, really, that neither of them had died before finding one another. It had been a real possibility.

“No,” he replied. “I don't need to.”

“If you say so,” came her answer, a near-silent whisper.

It was a long night. They barely slept at first, up late discussing the events of that night and trading hypotheticals about the day after. Dolarhyde appeared in many of the conversations, from his brash manner with Chilton to his delusions of grandeur in his Games to the threat he posed to them now. The only real vulnerability he'd shown was when asked about McClane, going quiet and even more monosyllabic than usual, but speaking gently, something that he rarely did. Will had almost felt for him in that moment. He knew what it was like to be sent in to the arena up against someone you loved.

In the end, they did sleep a little, which was already far more than last time. They couldn't have gotten more than a few hours, but it would be enough to keep them going. Will dreamt of dragons and fire, the fierce heat of Dolarhyde's stare, and wings, big and red and enfolding, stretching out behind him. Bev told him she dreamt of the sea, endless and blue. Will envied her. He wished he'd dreamed of blue rather than red, of the sea and the sky and Abigail's eyes. Not the colour of blood. Not today. He'd be seeing enough of it later.

Blues and reds were inconsequential for now, however. The hovercraft was black, as it sped him toward the mystery location of the arena. The Launch Room was white, as he let Alana strap him into his clothes. That was all the lives of tributes were *worth*, after all. The Capitol got the colours, and the District got the shades of black, white and grey. Whether he would die or not: that was black and white. No middle ground. No escape.

“Are you nervous?” Alana inquired.

“Not as much as last time.”

“I'm so sorry that you're here again, Will,” she whispered, and there was a tremble in her voice, similar to the quiver of her hands as she had buttoned up his thin jacket. Her eyes looked wet. “You don't deserve this.”

She retrieved something from her pocket, pressing it into his palm. It was his stag. He'd given it to Freddie the day before, with her assurance that she'd try with all her might to get it through, hoping that the sharpness of its points wouldn't prevent it from following him in there. And here it was, his gift from Hannibal, being kept by his side. At least he got to die with it.

“None of us do.”

Despite all their differences, despite all the madness and insanity, despite the age gap… he was cut from the same cloth as these people. He'd kill them if he had to, but he didn't *hate* them. He didn't *want* to kill them, and it wasn't their fault they were trying to murder him- they were in the same situation as he was, and it was against their will. He couldn't blame them for any of it.

“But I don't know them,” Alana argued. “Not like I know you.” She paused, frustrated, stepping away from him and exhaling shakily. “You're just a *child* compared to them.”

“I was just a child last year.”

“Up against *other children*. But *now*...”

“Alana… there isn't much either of us can do,” he murmured. Her face creased in sympathy. “I just have to go up there and fight. I… Thank you. For everything. You're a good person and a good friend. I'm really lucky to have known you.”

He heard her let out a small cry before she gathered him up in her arms, pulling her close to him and clinging on tightly. It was desperately sad, and he found that he was almost choking back his own tears at the feeling of it. He liked Alana. He respected her. And he'd miss her a great deal. He thought perhaps that she and Abigail would've gotten along if this were a different world, and they'd ever be able to meet.

But this was the world he lived in. There was no changing it, and it was too late now.

His world was about to end.

Chapter 19

Heavy humidity was the first thing his brain took note of as he breathed in new air, the cylinder pushing him up into the arena, into his death chamber. Dappled sunlight illuminated the large space around him, casting shadows where it fell. Glancing around, he saw a startling amount of green. Green in the dense foliage, in the overgrown vegetation, in the moss stuck around the trunks of trees. He could see the Cornocopia a short distance away, nestled amongst the trees so tightly that the leaves draped onto it, wet and sticky. Finally, his brain registered the tributes, dotted around the Cornocopia in that same perfect circle they always were. On his right was Silvestri, face pale and sweaty, and on his left was Pimms, her expression vacant and eyes distracted, following the movements of a bird in some distant trees. He swallowed back his pity for her, straining his eyes to see the faces of the other victors, pulse rocketing as he searched for Bev and Hannibal. This wouldn't be like last time. This *couldn't* be like last time. He wouldn't lose her.

The timer was down to thirty seconds now. He readied himself. If he couldn't see them now, he'd find them soon.

"*No!*"

The shout was shocked and visceral, pleading and gutting. Will felt his stomach drop.

His head shot round with everyone else's, eyes finding the origin of the sound. His gaze fixed on Madchen and a split second before the man next to her stepped off his metal circle, face set and determined. Someone inhaled sharply, and the next sound he heard was the inevitable heart-stopping explosion, sending up smoke and fire and ash where the boy's feet feet had landed. He'd known it was coming the moment he saw the empty metal circle, but he hadn't had nearly enough time to prepare for it. Tears of distress stung his eyes. Someone released a sob. Everyone else, including him, just stayed quiet, stewing in guilt and sorrow and fear. They felt sorry for him, of course, but Will would bet on the fact that most of them were secretly relieved. Only a little bit, but *still*. It was one less tribute to worry about.

Madchen, horrified, caught his gaze. Even at this distance, he could see the tears staining her cheeks and the despair drowning out all other emotions. He could see her chest rising and falling with panicked breaths. Her pain wasn't something he wanted to see. But it was better than looking down at the charred mess of the half-alive tribute.

The gong sounded, and he pulled his eyes away from her, feeling the rush of adrenaline as he sprinted from the metal circle and made for the Cornocopia, mind blocking out sounds of all the other tributes and focusing on the goal. The stag was zipped tight in his pocket, resting over his heart. He arrived there at the same time as a few other tributes, and didn't hesitate. He snatched up the closest weapon he could find, clasping it tightly in his fist, and swinging it sideways into someone's flank, hearing them yell in pain and fall, feeling the flesh and tissue part around the weapon. Looking at his hand, he saw he'd slashed them with a sword, so he spun around to finish the job, pulling it from where it was lodged and propelling it

through the chest of some poor woman kneeling before him and clutching her side. She flopped to the ground, dead.

“Will.”

He swung the sword round again in a blind panic, only for it to clank against the shield that Hannibal was holding up. He used it to push the sword away dismissively, like it was nothing but a minor inconvenience, and grinned wolfishly at Will, glancing at the dead tribute. Will beamed back, wanting desperately to throw himself into Hannibal's arms, clutch him with abandon and fierce joy. He hated the Games. But this had been their kingdom, once upon a time. Fighting and eating and sleeping, the basics of life, with only each other for company. It had formed their bond.

“Hannibal,” he responded, flippant, with a half-smirk. Now wasn't the time to start hugging, but a few lines of conversation didn't hurt anyone.

“Duck,” Hannibal said, and Will dropped to a crouch as Hannibal smashed his shield into somebody's head, sending them reeling backwards into the side of the Cornocopia with a thump. He vaulted over Will to presumably attack them, but Will didn't get the chance to turn and see due to a sword being brought down heavily before he could move, crashing against his, which he managed to lift just in time.

Pushing back, he attempted straighten his legs and stand, but the tribute above him was far too strong, forcing him further down and onto his back, practically clambering onto him as they shoved their sword ferociously against his. He couldn't tell who it was, they were simply a faceless blur to him, identity hidden by the clash of their swords. He didn't particularly *want* to know at this moment in time, considering he was largely distracted by the great weight they were forcing on him, pushing him closer and closer to the possibility of dying. They grunted above him with exertion, and he allowed his eyes to flick to the side, checking to see if there were any sort of weapon he could use to combat them. His arms strained as he tried to keep them at bay, but he could feel that they would give out soon. When that happened, the sword would cut into his face, and he'd be at his opponent's mercy. If he could manage to find something, *anything* to hit them with, then he just might be able to get free. There would be a dangerously small window of time for him to drop his sword and fight back, and it was almost certain that the swords would come crashing down on him and slice his face open if he didn't find a weapon. But it was better than lying here and letting himself die- he had to at least try *something*. If only Hannibal weren't so busy dealing with the other tribute…

Then suddenly, the weight of it all disappeared, the person above him going limp for a second before falling to the side with a choked gasp. Standing there was Madchen, heaving for breath, a jagged stone damp with moss in her hand. The moss was tinted red with blood, and when he looked beside him, the once vicious tribute's eyes were now unseeing, blood gushing from the side of his head. Will barely recognised him. This victor was just another tribute to him, that had disappeared into the masses. Unrecognised, unimportant. He'd died inside the Cornocopia, which was probably a bad angle for the cameras. He'd be insignificant and unseen even in death.

“You saved me,” Will said, looking up at Madchen. He was dazed, and it was obvious.

“I did.”

“Allies?” he asked, before he could stop himself. He couldn't deny that he *liked* Madchen, was hopelessly and reluctantly fond of her unusual kindness and seamless approachability. He shouldn't be asking her to ally with him, not without Bev and Hannibal's opinions, but… he couldn't help it. He *wanted* Madchen around. Bev probably wouldn't be that bothered and if Hannibal was, he wouldn't say anything. He was far too polite.

She smiled down at him. “Allies,” she agreed, and turned at the sound of someone running towards her, grabbing an axe just in time and meeting their blow, joining the fray.

Then there were hands behind him, and he almost panicked at prospect, but recognised their swift deftness immediately. Hannibal was hauling him to his feet, hands yanking him up by his armpits frantically, spinning him round and clutching his face.

“Are you-”

“I'm *fine*.”

Hannibal sighed, hands dropping. “We need to go,” he said, tone a warning.

Will finally engaged with their surroundings: there were multiple dead tributes in the Cornocopia, and the fighting outside it was continuing with ferocious intensity. He watched in detached resignation as Hannibal gathered supplies, weapons and packs and everything he could carry. Will felt desperation well up within him, but couldn't move to dispel it.

“Beverly,” he croaked out. “I don't know where she is.”

Hannibal ceased his collecting of provisions, looking to Will with sad certainty, and opened his mouth to reply. He was prevented from doing so, however, by Bev's voice from the entrance to the Cornocopia.

“I'm here.”

She stood in the Cornocopia's mouth, safe and all in one piece, save for a scratch along her arm that was a little wet with blood. Madchen was by her side, a small smile stretching her mouth. Will grinned, marching over and dragging Bev into a fierce hug, relief crowding his system and rushing through his veins. Whatever came later, they'd deal with it then. For now, he had everyone and everything he needed to keep *wanting* to survive. This was exactly the way things should be

“We really do need to go, Will,” Hannibal reminded him, grabbing another pack and throwing it to Madchen, who caught it with a surprised huff. “Are you joining us, Georgia?”

“Am I welcome?”

“Certainly.”

“Then yeah. I think I'd like that.”

Hannibal smirked, simply a toned down version of that smile Will had received when he'd seen the dead tribute he'd killed, and Will had an idea of what was going on inside Hannibal's head. Hannibal… wasn't normal. He delighted in this sort of situation, free to kill and maim and eat what he pleased, without judgement that was too harsh, as it was in civilised society. This was Hannibal stripped bare, right to his core, and this was what he enjoyed. His grin… it was *hungry*.

Shoving a pack at Will, he strode forward to lead them through the massacre occurring only steps away. Nobody was particularly focusing on the Cornocopia for some odd reason, but as they finally stepped out into the daylight, Will saw why. It was Dolarhyde. He'd never fought with weapons, only fists and determination. Most of the tributes had either run in another direction, or were lying dead on the ground. The ones left were fighting tooth and nail against Dolarhyde, who was just as barbaric as he'd always been. Will noticed McClane on the sidelines, simply watching, her shoulders slumped and her hands pressed to her mouth. Everything about it screamed defeat, sorrow. He could do nothing but tear his gaze away, focusing again on following Hannibal, who was attempting to sneak them around the side of the Cornocopia, glancing around in that lightning-fast way that only predators did, checking to see if the coast was clear. In one final move, they darted alongside the curved metal wall to the back of the Cornocopia and away from the fighting, further into the arena. A vast jungle stretched out before them, a canopy of trees with no clear path, and amid the trees: Bernardone. He looked lost and confused, approaching a tiny bird perched in one of the trees with his arm outstretched. This was the arena, however. Who knew what horrors lurked within a simple bird?

“Don't!”

Bev had shouted out, and an advantage had been Bernardone's sudden stop, dropping his arm and turning toward them, but a potential disadvantage had been that *Dolarhyde might have heard them.* Hannibal barely waited a second before urging them forward, breaking into a run that now was definitely audible to Dolarhyde- the footfalls of four people, running for their lives? It wasn't a quiet sound. He barely noticed when Madchen grabbed Bernardone by the wrist, dragging him along with them and into the thickening hoards of trees, the darkening mess of the rainforest. They kept running.

In his mind, Will heard the infuriated roar of a dragon.

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Within less than an hour, they had slowed to a walk. Not a few hours after that, they had to stop altogether. The heat was *sweltering*, like nothing Will had ever felt before. He'd assumed the hottest days he'd ever experience were summers in District 4, when things got so hot they'd take the long trip down to the beach, just to cool off in the sea. He'd been wrong. And as far as he knew, there wasn't a sea here. There was no source of water at all, actually, none that they could see. And they'd be needing one soon, considering this heat. He felt as if he'd lost half his body weight in sweat already.

“We should stop,” Hannibal finally said, sounding worn out himself.

Sighing in relief, Will stripped his shirt off and flopped into the grass before anyone could protest, the wet humidity against his skin a blessing. Thankfully, nobody seemed to want to protest, more or less following in his footsteps and attempting to cool down as much as possible. That had been pretty hard while they were walking. Sinking down beside him, Hannibal reluctantly sunk down to the forest floor, wrinkling his nose a little at the baseness of it all. Will couldn't help but laugh, a little.

“Enjoying yourself?”

“If you were so hot, you always could've asked to stop,” he muttered in that vaguely familiar petulant tone that should've annoyed Will, but endeared him instead. He had to prevent himself from laughing again.

“I assumed you'd know when to stop. When we were far enough away from the Cornocopia, I mean. I trust you, Hannibal.”

That changed his mood entirely, and Will was grateful for the low buzz of conversation between the girls and the distance in Bernardone's expression, where he rested against a tree opposite them. Hannibal was smiling at Will all soft again, eyes seeing something that Will couldn't, and couldn't begin to understand even if it were visible to him.

“Thank you, dear Will,” he replied, voice thick despite its low volume. He cleared his throat, glancing up toward the canopy, where a few spots of light filtered through onto them. “I'll admit… I don't quite look forward to the next few days in here.”

“What do you mean?”

“The heat… it's not something I'm accustomed to. Or something I *like*, particularly.”

“You and me both, pal,” Will said, laden with humour. But Hannibal still frowned, like Will knew he would. Probably at Will's choice of colloquialism. “Are we just going to keep walking?”

“I think that's probably the best idea. That way we can see more of the arena, perhaps understand it better… Hopefully, we'll come across some water at some point.”

“The bottles in the packs will last us a few days.”

“Only a few.”

“I'm more worried about the other tributes, if I'm being honest. They're more of a threat than they were last year.”

“We'll deal with them,” Hannibal assured, swift and confident, and Will believed him.

Yes, the other tributes were previous victors, and had years more experience with both killing and understanding one another. But this was *them*. They'd live. They *had* to live. There was so much unexplored territory with him and Hannibal, and he could *feel* it sometimes when they made eye contact, like electricity was crackling in the air between them. It seemed

impossible that he'd die before he understood it, before he could put a name to that swelling, ever-growing truth that they held. They'd get through this together, or not at all.

The cannons sounded above them, signifying the death of six tributes at the massacre.

He reached across the space, hand closing over Hannibal's, where it lay unmoving on the ground. Hannibal smiled at him, eyes fathomless, hungry as ever.

Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

A few more hours making their way through the jungle nearly got the best of Will, tiring him out more than he ever thought possible, wiping the sweat off his brow and trying to ignore his legs aching. He'd thought he was *fit*, able to deal with this sort of exertion, especially considering he'd spent the last year trying to stay out of his unfamiliar house for as long as he could, whether that was through running or dog walking or both. But this was something else- they were all panting and sighing as they kept moving on, quietening the later it got as the glare of the sun lessened through the canopy and took them one step closer to stopping. It was barely sunset when they eventually halted their trek through the rainforest, forcing themselves upright for a little longer as they valiantly attempted to set up the tent they'd found in Madchen's pack, nailing it to the uneven and ridged ground the best they could.

Hannibal had been tactical in allowing Madchen to join them, since now they had multiple packs between them- at least double compared to last time, when it had been him and Hannibal trying to live off whatever they could scrounge. Will wasn't quite sure what they had to gain from Bernardone, however. It wasn't as if *he* minded, since Bernardone was harmless and Will felt slightly protective over him, but he couldn't work out why Hannibal would allow it. Hannibal didn't make decisions based on that sort of thing, he was far more practical, Will was sure of it.

It was then, as Madchen began crawling into the poorly-constructed tent, that he felt a hand brush against his arm. Bernardone was beside him, eyes firmly fixed on the forest floor, shoulders hunched in that nervous way that made him look smaller and skinnier than he already was. Will could see the words building in his mind, see his mouth twitch as his tongue worked out how to say them.

“Th-thank you,” he stuttered out after a few seconds, eyes darting up and then down again, his skittishness and fearful twitches filling Will with some deep sadness. It was a shame, what had happened to him. “For letting me...”

“It's fine,” Will assured. “We weren't just going to leave you there.”

“Clark… H-he was there. Fighting.”

The mention of him made Will's teeth grind, that hot, righteous fury he felt towards him flaring up again. “That's probably a good thing. It means he's all the way back at the Cornocopia. There's a lot of distance between you now.”

From the angle they were standing, with Bernardone's head facing down, it was hard to see his frown. But Will caught it just as he glanced up a little, confused. “A… a g-good thing?” he repeated.

“Ingram shouldn't be anywhere near you,” Will explained, having it come out more forceful than intended. Bernardone didn't flinch at it though, only seemed all the more perplexed.

“You- you don't like him?”

“He's a murderer.”

Whatever had kept Bernardone so restrained before, likely his humiliation at the hands of Ingram, suddenly cracked. He almost came out of his shell, head shooting up at Will's affirmation and eyes going wide. Will could see he was trembling, and reached out a hand to steady him, calming. He couldn't help but wonder if Bernardone had never heard these words before, if nobody *ever* had admitted they believed him. It sort of made him want to cry.

“You- you b-believe m-me?” His stutter was worse, tongue tripping over the words in desperation and disbelief. Will's supposed steadying hand was doing nothing to still his shaking, just vibrating along with the violent tremors shocking Bernardone's body.

“Yes,” Will said, fervent, focused on Bernardone's face. “I believe you, Peter. We all do.”

The gratitude in his face… Will didn't think he'd ever forget it. It was *humbling*, earth-shattering. The face of a man who could die happy, relieved and overjoyed and *drowning* in it. There was no need for him to say thank you, his face said it all, and he *knew* his face said it all. Will could barely imagine what it must've been like, *years* of being shunned and hated and ignored. But finally: this. Validation.

“Are you coming in?” Hannibal asked, poking his head through the flap of the tent. “It'll be dark soon. We were just looking through the supplies and seeing if we could find something decent for dinner amongst all the dried fruit and nuts.”

His tone was clearly disdainful of the poor selection they had. Fondness passed through Will at his picky and snobbish taste, another of Hannibal's eccentricities that he couldn't get enough of. Will only hoped he wouldn't be given roasted human to eat, this year. He glanced to Peter, who was smiling at the ground.

“Yeah,” he answered, with a barely-hidden grin. “We'll join you.”

They feasted on dried fruit and nuts, just as Hannibal had feared. It was decided that there should be a few people each night to take watches, considering there were so many of them and they were sleeping in a bulky, easily-visible tent. Madchen and Bev volunteered first, before Hannibal could do his usual polite, self-sacrificial routine. He and Will would just have to take their turns the next night. Whether or not Peter would take a watch wasn't even discussed: his stutter, while there was nothing *wrong* with it, per se, wouldn't be helpful if he had to suddenly shout out to them due to imminent danger. By the time they'd all finished, darkness was blanketing the sky and the anthem had started to play, preparing to present the faces of the dead in the sky. Hannibal clung to his wrist when he moved to crawl out of the tent with the others, giving a minute shake of his head when Will turned to him in confusion.

“Don't look,” Hannibal said, voice firm. “Don't give them that.”

Don't give the Capitol that. Don't give *Verger* that. It was what he meant, and Will knew it the second their eyes met. He grit his teeth, feeling Hannibal's nails bite into his skin. He didn't move, hearing nothing but the sound of the anthem alongside the faces of dead tributes that he couldn't see. It wasn't *necessary* for him to check who was dead, so he didn't. Hannibal was *right*. Let Verger think he just didn't care enough to look.

Once the anthem died down, the nightlife in the jungle emerged. All mutts, Will supposed, created fresh and new for the Quarter Quell. Or better yet, a reuse of the mutts used in previous Games. The Gamemakers were lazy like that, sometimes. Mutts or not, the chirping of crickets and croaking of frogs was a nice sound to fall asleep to, curled against Hannibal's chest in one of the three sleeping bags they owned. Bev was taking first watch, and a distant part of him was slightly worried about her all alone out there, in an unfamiliar arena with two unfamiliar people sharing a tent with them. But the day had truly worn him out, sending him off to sleep before he could even consider checking on her or making sure she had weapons.

In the end, it turned out, Beverly had nothing to worry about.

Madchen did, however.

It was her that woke them during her watch, in the early hours of the morning, practically tearing the tent down and urging them to *run*. They did. Will felt a prick of sharp pain on his upper arm, but ignored it, dismissing it as a wayward branch.

The buzzing in his ears couldn't be dismissed so easily, though.

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Will was awake and not awake. He could hear his breath in his ears, could taste his saliva. He'd always been able to. He'd just never noticed it before, is all.

“Will,” Hannibal was whispering. His voice was like waves crashing against the rocks. His voice was like the breeze teasing through the trees. “Will.”

Through blurred sight, he watched as Hannibal pulled a blade across Pimms' neck, face filled with some immeasurable fury that Will recognised all too well. It was that animal inside him that came out when he was fighting. Will had seen it before, when he'd had his hands locked around Brown's neck, teeth bared and eyes darker than ever, like some wild, uncontrollable thing. Then he'd come to Will, and heeled. He'd come to Will and cradled him as if he were the most precious thing in the universe. If Will weren't so traumatised at the time, he'd probably have been heady off that rush of power, being able to tame the untameable. He wasn't traumatised now, just a bit drowsy.

And lying down, for some reason.

So when Hannibal came to him, hands wet and slick and red with blood, grasping at Will's face and kneeling before him like a dog obeying its master, he finally felt powerful. His hound of hell. His guard dog. Hannibal's eyes weren't dark now. They were light and human, and they were scared.

There had been bees, before. Lots of them. Madchen had likely warned them just in time, as Will had heard the unmistakeable thump and explosion of buzzing that could only be the sound of a hive hitting the ground, as he'd been running away in the same vague direction as the others. That was where things got hazy. They'd kept going for a little while, he was sure of it.

But then he'd stopped.

Through the trees, there had been a flash of red, and then a deep, heaving exhale. The nearest tree had caught fire, bursting up into flames like a funeral pyre. A sickening roar had told him everything he'd needed to know: amongst them, there was a Great Red Dragon. The flames licked further up the tree, burning away the moss covering it, stripping it bare, to the deep chestnut-coloured wood of its natural state. It had burnt all the way through the canopy, exposing the starless sky above them. When Will looked harder, however, he saw that it wasn't a starless sky at all- it was the underbelly of the beast, of the Dragon, gliding above them.

Will wished he was free like that. Roaming and flying, the whole world open for exploration. But he was from a District, where they were caged like animals.

He'd wanted to lay down, then. So he did. He was on fire too, he thought. Not on the outside, not visibly, but there was a small spot on his arm that was white hot, spreading a fire under his skin, lighting up his body. If he concentrated hard enough, he could smell his skin singing with it. Had the Dragon set him alight? Was he going to die?

“You aren't on fire.” Bev was leaning over him, her hair falling into his face. She was pressing something wet against his arm. It quenched the flames, a little bit.

“You aren't on fire,” she repeated.

“You can call me Georgia, you know,” Madchen mumbled at one point.

“H-he's still out there,” Peter stuttered. “Waiting.”

“Will,” Hannibal hissed, pressing their foreheads together, rocking them backward and forward. “My Will.”

There was laughter, and Pimms' skin looked reddened and raw as Hannibal cut her throat with the rage of a spurned lover, and someone was singing. Some old song that his father used to sing, something about meadows. Abigail danced across the rocks in the river, hair swinging in the wind. Her voice was haunting, echoing throughout the trees like the tales of a dying songbird. Her eyes were blue and clear, full of fear. Above him, she looked like an angel, sunlight fanning out behind her head, a glowing halo.

“I love you,” she said. “Come home to me.”

“I want to,” he replied. “I wish I was anywhere but here.”

“Where's anywhere?” she asked, and suddenly he was four years old again, sitting opposite his father in the kitchen. His father's kind eyes and frown lines were a comforting sight to see while the rest of his world was blood and flesh and violence.

Where was anywhere? Anywhere wasn't here. Anywhere was the meadows and the mountains and the sea. Anywhere was the river he'd jumped into when Abigail had nearly died, it was the bed he and Hannibal shared, it was the corridor they'd kissed in. He went back there in his dreams, often, just to relive it. The soft press of Hannibal's lips, the richness of his voice afterwards. Will had nearly forgotten how he'd called him beautiful. That was one part he'd never quite figured out. He wondered if things would've been different if he hadn't been too shocked to kiss back, if he'd slipped his tongue into Hannibal's mouth and let his body take over from there, moulding them together the way they were destined to be: one entity.

“Wake up for me. Please.”

There was more wetness on his arm. The fire was almost entirely put out, now, racking his body with cold shivers and leaving nothing but an empty, charred space.

“You aren't on fire.”

“I tried to stop him, but he knew he'd die the minute he stepped off that circle. He told me he couldn't go through it all again. Can't say I blame him.”

“He k-killed all of them. E-every last one.”

“You can't die. You don't understand yet.”

“I love the sky.” It was Molly, with her pretty hair and her steady presence. She was in the grass beside him, hand tangled in his, skin pale in the moonlight. “Don't you love the sky, Will? Don't you love me?”

Nearly. *I wanted to*, he wanted to say, *but life got in the way*. His tongue was lead in his mouth. He couldn't tell her anything except the word *no*, which was a *lie*, he'd *lied* to her, and she'd *known*. He'd seen it in her face. The disappointment. The sad acceptance. He'd lied and he couldn't take it back. He would if he could.

“You love *him*.” She was sitting up now, glaring at some undefined shape among the trees. There was venom in her tone, a cruelty that he'd never thought she was capable of, and he was sick with it. He could taste vomit in his mouth.

The undefined shape was becoming clearer. Whatever it was had a pair of antlers, extending and curling up into the mess of mossy branches and vines above it. Will could hear it moving toward him, its hooves hitting the ground with deafening thuds. Fog swirled around its legs, making it look like some great mythical monster as it emerged into the daylight, proud and wrathful. It was a stag, the stag that rested in the pocket over his heart, the stag that Hannibal had given him on that day they'd swam together. He could swear he was swimming now, the sweat pouring off him like water, lifting his body from the grass and floating him upwards. It kept going, filling the arena like a glass, slipping down his throat and curling around his

lungs. The stag remained unaffected, unmoving as the waves crashed around it, washing away the blood that stained the grass.

When he turned to Molly, she was gone.

When he turned back to the stag, it was gone.

A man stood in its place. He had a finger pressed to his lips.

“Don't be a coward.”

It was him. It had always been him, always him. The one Will was running from. The one Will was running *to*. A gasp bubbled from his lips, and glancing around, he noticed that the sweat flooding from him and into the arena wasn't water at all. It was blood. Blood that was warm and real, *his* blood, soaking from his pores. He was bleeding like a broken faucet. Like he'd been cut right open and nobody was stemming the flow. Cut right open like something Hannibal wanted to eat.

Somebody laughed, a low chuckle that reverberated through Will's skull.

See?

Chapter End Notes

the second half is just a fun dreamy sequence that I really enjoyed writing lol. It's nice to not write something that has to be linear, and don't we all miss delusional season 1 will?

It's snowing a LOT in my little part of england which means a day in bed with my cat and loads of time to edit!! Hopefully I'll get chapter 21 out later today or tomorrow. Merry Christmas!

Chapter 21

“Why didn't you notice sooner?”

“For the last time, I'm sorry! I noticed as soon as I could. There wasn't much light.”

“The whole point of having a watch is to prevent something like *this*.”

“Hannibal, *please*. I've apologised. I don't know what else you want me to say.”

“I don't want-”

“What's going on?” He recognised that last voice as his own, scratchy from lack of use. He was still lying down, head cushioned on some sort of clothing item. After blinking a few times and clearing the blur from his eyes, he could see three figures frozen stock still at his sudden words, all eyes on him. It was only when he attempted to sit up, groaning with the effort of it, that they moved. People were crouched by his side in an instant. “Why is everyone shouting?”

“Will-”

“You were hurt-”

“It was a mistake-”

“It's been a day-”

“I didn't mean-”

“Stop!” Bev's outburst was jarring, causing him to jump a little at the suddenness of her raised voice. “You're acting like children.” The barb was aimed at Hannibal and Georgia, who Will realised were the voices shouting from before, and had been tripping over their words and each other only a few seconds ago.

“What happened?” he asked, looking to Bev, who seemed to be the only calm one.

“It was Pimms. She crept up behind the tent. Georgia noticed just in time,” Bev answered. Her voice was soft, and she smoothed his hair back from his forehead in an almost motherly fashion, reverting into that casual intimacy they'd always held with each other. Hannibal cleared his throat, uncharacteristically awkward. “She threw a tracker jacker nest at us. God knows how she managed to come across a fully intact hive… We all ran. But one stung you. Remember?”

“I remember some of it. I've been unconscious?”

“Sometimes. Sometimes you just sort of… babbled. You were hallucinating, I think.”

“What did I say?” He was suddenly, sharply terrified. Some things should be private. He didn't like the idea that he'd been delirious and vulnerable, spilling his deepest secrets to his friends.

“Nothing that made sense. Stuff about fire and death. It was pretty weird,” she answered, laughing a little. It stilled his nerves. “Peter got stung too, but he hasn't woken up yet. We had to stop here because of you two, and Pimms followed… most of the tracker jackers had attacked her instead of us. She was all stung. And then...”

“I killed her,” Hannibal interjected, matter-of-fact. “I slit her throat.”

“Where are the tracker jackers now?”

“Feasting on her dead corpse, probably. We carried you and Peter further enough away that they won't come after us,” Hannibal explained. “It was her they wanted, in the end.”

He hadn't quite looked at Will yet. He'd fallen at his side as he began to wake up, and his hand now rested on Will's thigh, thumb rubbing tiny subconscious circles into the skin there. Will felt fire spreading under his skin, but it wasn't like the fire from before. That had been scorching, painful, deadly. This was like a warm hearth in the wintertime: familiar, safe. When their eyes met, finally, it was like coming home. Something he'd be able to navigate even in the dark.

“Why were you shouting?” he asked again, watching as Hannibal displayed that rare shame that occasionally hit him if he'd been impolite. “That isn't like you. You don't shout.”

“I was angry.”

“Why?”

“It's my fault,” Georgia cut in, her voice laden with guilt. “I should've noticed sooner. It's my fault you were stung. I'm so sorry.”

“But… I'm fine?”

“You *weren't*. Hannibal was angry at me. Understandably.”

Sighing, he turned to Hannibal, who had his head hung in embarrassment at the emotion that seemed to have driven his reaction. Will had to admit, he was surprised. Hannibal was usually the person to look at things logically, understand that what Georgia had done had been a mistake and one sting from a tracker jacker wasn't fatal. He was practically a doctor. Surely he'd know that?

“I'm alive,” he said, and he wasn't sure who's benefit it was for. “Georgia, I don't blame you. It happened. Things *happen* in the arena. And Hannibal...”

“I know,” came his answer, reproach in his tone. “I'm sorry for how I reacted, Georgia. I was cruel to you. You didn't deserve it.”

It was silent for a moment, a sweet moment of camaraderie blooming between them all, with words an unnecessary and unused tool. It lasted mere seconds, however, broken by the sudden gasping of Peter as he seemingly awoke from his temporary coma, sending Georgia and Bev tumbling over to check on him. Hannibal barely registered it, gaze switching back to Will in that way it always did. He brought a hand up to brush a curl from Will's face, letting his palm curve and push against Will's cheek. Will wondered if he'd start making promises. That's what he'd done last time this had happened in an arena.

“I almost lost you.”

“You didn't.”

“It felt like it,” he whispered. “Seeing you, lying there. I knew it wasn't a death sentence. I knew I'd administered the right treatment. But… what if something had gone wrong? If there had been complications of some sort? I couldn't help but think…”

“What if I'd died?” Will finished for him, and Hannibal nodded, sad. “Well I didn't, for starters. But I don't know, I mean… it *could* happen. Eventually. Maybe you should prepare for that?”

As he said the words, he watched that softness in Hannibal's eyes harden by the second, shifting into something fierce and desperate that he'd seen as he slit Pimms' throat, letting the blood gush over his hands, a waterfall of lost life.

“No,” Hannibal said, determined. “I won't lose you. I *can't*. Will. My Will.”

There was a tremble in his voice on the last few words. *Kiss him*, Will thought. He *wanted* to. Their faces were certainly close enough, and Hannibal's heavy lidded affection was *intoxicating* to him, making him want to simply clutch his hands in Hannibal's hair and go for it. Would Hannibal object? Usually he thought he would, but now… perhaps not. There was something open and vulnerable about him, his mouth parted, almost like he was waiting to be kissed. His breathing had begun to quicken.

“Hannibal-”

“We should get going,” Georgia interrupted, from where she was standing a few metres away. She hadn't *known* it had been an interruption, had been tending to Peter and not listening to their conversation, but Will saw irritation flicker in Hannibal's eyes nonetheless. “It'll be dark soon, and we've barely moved. We should get through a few miles before we stop for the night.”

Hannibal removed his hand from its position against Will's cheek, eyes flicking away, and the moment was broken.

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“Why is it that an hour walking in here feels like three days in the other arena?” he wondered aloud, trudging alongside Bev through the undergrowth, hearing her quiet laugh in response.

“Maybe they've lengthened the days?” she joked, grinning when he turned to throw her a mock glare. “The climate is different, and we haven't had enough time to get used to it. It's a lot harder on us when we're walking for so long.”

“Yeah, I see your point. I wish we could just stay put, though.”

“That isn't the best idea. We stayed put for almost a day, and that was already too long.”

“I know. I expect Hannibal was complaining.”

She shot him a sharp look, slightly amused but also a little bewildered at his assumption. “No. He really wasn't.”

He didn't know what she meant. He couldn't quite bring himself to ask.

A breeze kissed through the trees, teasing the nape of Will's neck and ruffling through his curls. He sighed, pointing his gaze up to the canopy and its greenery, the sunlight curling around the chaos of branches and leaves and filtering onto them unevenly. It reminded him of what the sky looked like from underwater. He loved that sight. Sometimes he'd sink below the water and hold his eyes open so long they started stinging.

The air brushed Bev's hair past Will's arm.

“We've been drifting apart,” she murmured, after a few minutes had passed. Thankfully, the others were walking up front, snippets of their conversation carried backward by the wind. It meant they wouldn't overhear whatever private confessions were about to be spoken between him and Bev. “We aren't the same, now.”

“I'm sorry if I've been distant,” he replied. “This whole thing with Hannibal...”

“It's not just you that's been distant,” she admitted. “And it isn't about Hannibal. I won't deny that your relationship with him is certainly part of it, but that's not where it started.”

“Where do you think it started?”

“The Games. That whole thing. It ruined us as separate people, so it makes sense it ruined us together as well.”

“It doesn't have to,” he argued. “We don't have to let it.”

“How do we *stop* it?” she asked, and the helplessness in her tone sent a pang through his heart. It hurt to watch her hurt. “I don't want to lose you. Especially not now, after I feel like we haven't talked properly in *months*. We aren't the same. I wish we were.”

“We're never going to be the *same*,” he said, bitterness pervading him. “The Games made sure of that. We aren't the same, you're right, but that doesn't have to be a bad thing. There's nothing wrong with change. Granted, the increasing mental health problems aren't a *good* change,” he paused as she laughed, the sound floating up and into the trees, “but our relationship doesn't have to change for the worse. I know it has recently, I know we've had some hard months, but we need to put that behind us. We need to move on.”

“How?”

“Like this,” he answered, reaching for her hand, and squeezing. “We move on like this. Together.”

The affection that flowed through him as she smiled was overpowering. She was something he'd always had, and he'd almost lost her. Not through death or violence, but through that cold and empty aftermath that had left them both reeling, dancing around each other and interacting in a way they never had before, not in all their seventeen years of knowing each other. It had been *hard*, having a constant reminder of the Games practically living on his doorstep. It had been hard to realise that he'd replaced her as his crutch, switching her in for Hannibal instead. It had been hard to see that while growing up, they might just grow apart.

But not now. They could die, now. They probably *would*. There was no use in letting themselves lose each other. They'd fix it in any way they could.

“This is a good thing,” she remarked. “I think I needed this. Considering you almost *died* today.”

“I didn't almost *die*, they were only tracker jackers. And don't give me that bullshit, you barely looked phased.”

“Please, I was panicking *inside*, of course. But *someone* had to be calm, and the other two obviously weren't going to play that role, constantly arguing with each other about blame and guilt while they should've been looking after you and Peter.”

“*Hannibal* wasn't calm? That's a first.”

“Don't act so surprised. You know how he gets when it's about you.”

“Um. No?”

She shook her head, and he could see her lips were pressed together in exasperation. Looking at Hannibal now, he seemed completely fine, deep in conversation with Georgia and Peter, slashing away at any vegetation blocking their path. Watching the way his body moved when he exercised his strength to do it wasn't… unpleasant, either.

“Oh my god, the *both* of you,” Bev suddenly exclaimed, frustration clear. “You're *ridiculous*. Stop ogling, and *look*, for once. You're supposed to be the one who's good at noticing things.”

“Noticing what? If you're that desperate for me to know, just tell me?”

“It isn't really my place.” She sighed, looking between the two of them. “Besides, that would be cheating.”

“*Bev*.”

“Just… Think about it? About everything? How much he wanted to be your ally, how he protected you, how you share a bed… him volunteering for you, *just in case*...” There was a

lightness in her step as she quickened her pace, moving from beside him. “Contrary to popular belief, you're not a *complete* idiot. You can figure this one out.”

Leaving him stunned and speechless, she darted forward, catching up with Georgia and falling into step with her. He was a little dazed as they continued their slow trek through the jungle, but he knew that this time, he couldn't push whatever Bev had said to the back of his mind. There was some big thing that Hannibal wanted him to understand, and now Bev… If he had some luck, they were the same thing. And in his world of uncertainty, he was growing tired of secrets.

The fathomless mystery that lay dormant behind Hannibal's eyes had always been a part of the attraction. But Will was interested in *all* of him. That included what he was stripped bare, the monster at heart. No mystery could last forever.

Chapter 22

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Hooded eyes. A kiss.

You truly are beautiful.

Oh.

Gasping awake, heart rocketing, he attempted to process his thoughts. He'd been dreaming. But it wasn't really a dream, was it? More of a memory- it had happened. Hannibal had kissed him and called him beautiful. Hannibal, like Beverly had reminded him, had wanted to be his ally, despite his lack of skill. Hannibal had viciously protected him. Hannibal had happily shared his bed with him. Hannibal had *volunteered* for him, just in case. The notion he was entertaining was ridiculous, of course, but… it didn't hurt to consider it. His mind had been racing through possibilities all day, and this was the only one that made any sense at all, even if it *was* a little out there.

Extricating himself from the sleeping bag he was sharing with Bev, he remained careful not to jostle her or make too much noise. The others were all fast asleep, sleeping soundly after their hectic morning. He'd slept a little, but it couldn't have been more than a few hours since they'd settled here for the night. He knew sleeping would be lost on him now, he was far too wired. Adrenaline was pulsing through him. Creeping through the entrance to the tent, he saw Hannibal's silhouette in the faint moonlight, casting shadows that darkened the grass. He was sitting on a moss-covered log a little ways from the tent, head aimed upwards in a way that gave Will the indication he was staring up at the sky. What he could see of it, anyway.

“I wish we could see more of the moon,” he murmured as he approached, cracking over twigs as he went, to alert Hannibal to his presence. A part of him knew, though, that he didn't really need to make any sound at all. Hannibal would know. Hannibal always knew.

“We saw quite enough of it in the last arena. This is simply… different.”

He stepped over the log, sitting down and sinking into Hannibal's warmth.

“I have a theory,” he said. Hannibal huffed in amusement at his segue from chatting about the moon to sudden interrogation, finally letting his gaze stray over to him, the small curl of a smile gracing his mouth. Will could see it again. That softness. Could his hypothesis really have some basis in truth? *Surely* not. “Can I ask you something?”

“Anything.”

“Are you in love with me?”

The world stopped.

Hannibal's breath seemed to rip from his throat almost painfully, fierce emotion filling his eyes with a power that made his insurmountable rage pale in comparison. It was *that* emotion, that great unspoken one that he constantly failed to hide and constantly sent Will's thoughts spiralling. He swallowed, and his voice wavered as he spoke.

“Will-”

“I'm not saying you are, it's only a theory. But I'm just… I'm tired,” he admitted. “I just need to know.”

There was a pause.

“I love you,” Hannibal breathed, a rush of words, like they were racing to leave his lips. The emotion his eyes held finally overspilled, breath punching out of him with an audible sigh. “I've loved you since the moment I saw you.”

Understanding shot through Will, clear as a bell. He could distinguish it from the mess of other feelings that his stomach began churning through, all the shock and the pleasure and the disbelief. He supposed it explained a lot, actually. And now he knew. For sure. Everything they had done together, everything they had been through, all the tortured yearning he had felt for Hannibal… it had led to this. Now. Whether Verger was angry they were exposing the fake relationship or not, he wouldn't be able to deny that the moment the public was getting was better than all their previous onscreen interactions combined.

“The chariots?” he reminisced, remembering Hannibal's dark eyes never moving away from him, an unmoving statue across the room.

“So you admit you noticed?” Hannibal accused, mirth sparkling in his tearful eyes. Will really had denied it. That was over a year ago now, during their first proper meeting. It seemed like a lifetime. “No. Before that. They played us the replay of the reaping on the train. And you… I was… *enthralled*. You were the most beautiful being I'd ever seen.”

“Hannibal...”

“Then I saw you in person. The chariots,” he repeated, hand drifting up to wrap one of Will's curls around his finger, an action that wasn't entirely uncommon for him. “I loved you even more. Every day, I've loved you more.”

His voice was cracking, breaking into hundreds of little pieces, and Will placed a hand on his thigh, calming. It was innocuous, even with the suggestive location. It was meant as a soothe to his pain, and Hannibal took it that way, catching his breath and finally looking away from Will, taking his hand with him.

“This is what you wanted me to understand?”

“Yes. I didn't want to say. I didn't want to ruin what we already had, not unless you worked it out yourself. I apologise if this makes you uncomfortable at al-”

“No,” Will said, almost surprised at its ferocity. “I didn't say that. I didn't say it made me uncomfortable.”

“How *does* it make you feel?” Hannibal inquired.

“A lot,” he whispered. “It makes me feel a lot. Relief, mostly.”

Hannibal glanced up again, interested by Will's choice of words. “Relief?” he repeated, breathless.

“Do you remember that party at the Capitol? With the fireworks?”

“You looked stunning that night.”

“I thought the same about you.”

There. He'd said it. All that suppressed longing seemed pointless now, spilling like ink into the nighttime between them, like it could've spilled so many times before. He thought of how often Hannibal had cradled him in his arms as they lay in bed, how many times he could've just *said* something, *done* something, and saved them all this waiting. Any shock he'd experienced at Hannibal's confession had evaporated now, shifting into something like peace, like a part of him had known this was coming. Had known it would all be okay.

Hannibal didn't look at peace. His face displayed nothing but some wild, frantic joy, animal in the same way as his fury.

“Will,” he sighed, eyes closing as Will reached up to wipe tears from his now-stained cheeks. The expression on his face was akin to euphoria, at Will's touch, at his reciprocation, at his mere vicinity. “Sweet Will.”

It was then that Will tilted his head upwards and let their lips meet in a kiss that felt as natural as the breeze skimming their skin- which wasn't natural at all, now he thought about it. The kiss was. They'd kissed before, but not like this. That had been simple, and for show. Or it had been a goodbye, brief and hidden in a back corridor. Now there was intent, *passion*. His hand on Hannibal's thigh wasn't so innocuous anymore, feeling tense muscle shift beneath it. Arousal pooled in him, vibrant and molten. How he had wanted this.

Hannibal opened his mouth with a muffled moan, and Will acted accordingly, deepening the kiss and hitching a leg up over Hannibal's lap. If Hannibal was surprised, he didn't show it, grasping at Will and dragging him closer, fingers scrabbling at his hips as Will attempted to situate his legs either side of Hannibal's. His fingers tangled into his hair with a pleased hum, tugging at the infuriatingly perfect strands, messing them up the way he'd always dreamt of. The image of Hannibal debauched, spoiled, because of *him*… it was an exciting one. He found himself groaning into Hannibal's panting mouth, which could only keen helplessly in response, eager hands trailing down Will's back, dangerously low. Will could feel how he wanted him in return, the way he had wanted him that morning during the Victory Tour. It was no less thrilling.

“I want you,” he murmured.

“I love you,” came Hannibal's choked reply. “I'm so in love with you.”

Will leaned back slightly, cupping Hannibal's cheek in a move that usually went the other way around. His eyes were full and fond. It made Will's heart swell, tightening his chest.

“I love you too,” he returned, watching as the confession made the adoration in Hannibal's expression grow. “I love you.”

Hannibal was kissing him again, overcome, wanton. He had abandoned any pretence of composure, had abandoned it the minute Will mentioned love. Feeling Hannibal fall apart beneath him did funny things to his heart and wonders for his self esteem. The kiss was hard and wet and warm, and where they met, it was red. Will had his eyes closed; *all* he could see was red. Wet and hot like blood, like violence, the language they spoke to one another in. Hannibal was gripping him so tightly he wondered if his fingerprints would leave bruises and brands, singed onto his skin. When his nails began to dig into Will's skin, he bit down on his lip, sweet punishment. Hannibal only pinched harder.

There was a freedom in it, kissing him like this. Will had felt so dauntingly like a ship in a bottle before, trapped, waiting out his fate and watching through a smudged glass lens. He was Verger's plaything. But now he was taking this for himself, snatching it right from the Capitol's hands and making it *his*, like it always should've been. Like it always *was*.

“My Will.”

It was spoken into the gap between their lips when they parted for breath. Will smiled, seams splitting with heady elation and debilitating arousal. Their foreheads were pressed together, faces so close that their breath mingled. In the moonlight, Will could see the outline of Hannibal's face: his stark cheekbones, the pout of his mouth, the curve of his eyelashes. If he pulled back a little farther, he could even catch a glimpse of the honeyed richness of his eyes.

They held the stars.

“Your eyes are an ocean,” Hannibal said, hushed, rapt, voice echoing Will's own thoughts. Will had never seen such devotion in anybody's face, not even the looks of youthful infatuation his father would throw his mother on occasion. This devotion towered above anything he'd ever seen. “Will Graham,” Hannibal murmured, fingertips tracing Will's jaw, “the great love of my life.”

Loving him felt like being split open. It felt like bloodletting.

“I didn't know you were so sentimental,” he muttered back, trying to lighten the mood.

“Neither did I,” Hannibal admitted, affection marring his tone. He was awed, astonished as he spoke. “How I love you.”

There was blood on his lips, where Will had bitten him. Will wanted to drink it down like wine. He wanted to lick it off and taste salt and metal, consume it from the wound like a fountain. There was a ghostly imprint of it on his own lips, a smudge; only the memory of blood, really. The source of it was staining Hannibal's lips scarlet, and Will thought it might

look comical if he weren't straddling him, weren't considering pushing him to the forest floor and making him arch in pleasure, gasp for breath, hands tight around his neck. Hannibal would let him have his way with him. Hannibal would let him do anything, right now, straining to be as close to Will as possible and trembling when he was.

“I made you bleed,” Will acknowledged, stare remaining pointed at Hannibal's mouth.

“You make me do many things, Will,” Hannibal uttered, eyes wide and fixed on Will in that way that they usually were, only now Will understood why. Not breaking eye contact, Hannibal raised a hand and brushed a finger along his lips, eventually moving his gaze as he held the finger up to the stars. A droplet of blood was caught on his nail. “It looks black under the light of the moon.”

“I prefer it red,” Will replied, and kissed him again.

Mostly, it was just to shut him up. He realised now that would be a good technique for when Hannibal went off on one of his pretentious tangents, talking of blood and stags and love. The tang of blood was unmistakeable, and he knew Hannibal was slowly losing his mind with desire as Will licked the crimson from his lips, his hips twisting against Will's in frustration. Will only smiled like he wasn't just as intoxicated, excitement and pleasure unfolding inside him with urgent need. They were both delirious with it, with each other, eyes unfocused as they abstained from the kiss to just stare at one another, stars locking sight with the sea.

He could hear the heavy steps of hooves behind them, thundering across the ground like a steady heartbeat, drawing nearer and nearer. He didn't need to look to tell it was the stag from his fever dream, looming over them. But… it wasn't menacing. It didn't *feel* menacing. It felt protective, proud. Not a predator in the same way the Dragon was. Will wanted to know what it meant, but that could wait. Hannibal seemed to be the more pressing issue, considering he was currently sitting astride him, gazing into his eyes like the star-crossed lovers people labelled them as. Maybe they were.

What a fucking cliché.

“What happens next?” he asked, lost in it all. He wasn't *scared*, exactly, but there was a certain apprehension that came with such a drastic shift in dynamic. Would their interactions really be all that different? There was the threat that if things ended badly between them, which he sincerely hoped they wouldn't, that their friendship would be damaged as well.

He was lost alright. He felt lost at sea, untethered, back there standing out there opposite Hannibal in the ocean, breaths mingling in the cold air. There had been dark endlessness surrounding him, blanketing him, and he'd loved with complete abandon. It was like that now, but this time, it didn't have to end.

“Nothing,” Hannibal answered, eyes shining in the starlight. “We go on.”

“This won't change anything?”

“Only the way we touch.” He smiled at Will, and it was unhindered by any mask. “The simple progression of life. We were always meant to be this way.”

“We're conjoined,” Will added. A smile was beginning to curl his mouth, and Hannibal visibly softened at the sight, hands moving from his lower back to seize his face gently and press their lips together once more, in an imitation of their very first kiss, chaste and sweet. It was a vast contrast to their kissing from before, laden down with heavy passion and want. Both worked for Will, and butterflies emerged in his stomach, wild and free.

Hannibal was right. This was the way things were supposed to be, the way that *they* were supposed to be, and the universe had been preparing them for it since they'd first locked eyes across that room in the Remake Center.

Verger could take his falsehoods and manipulations. They had each other.

Chapter End Notes

So, we're finally here. I hope the wait was worth it - and we're far from done!

Chapter 23

It was almost morning when Georgia emerged from the tent, dawn rising above the horizon and sending streaks of yellow and pink through the lightening sky. She saw them tangled together, dark circles under their eyes and gazes fixed on nothing but each other and laughed, ushering them to bed. She could take watch for a few hours. She owed them after yesterday, after all. It was kind of her and probably a good idea, considering they hadn't alternated watches like they were supposed to. That was Will's fault. He'd come out early and kissing wasn't an activity he felt like stopping so he could sleep. Instead, he'd stayed.

They'd kissed until their mouths were numb and their lips were swollen. They'd kissed like it was their last night on earth, and for all they knew, it was. They'd kissed and laughed and whispered love confessions until their throats were raw from speaking. Through the gaps in the canopy, the sky had turned from royal blue to deep black to dark grey. Stars had twinkled out of sight, but Will knew they were still up there. It was a sweet comfort.

Will hadn't felt so much like his age in a long time, creeping into the tent and muffling giggles any time either of them made a sound that wouldn't usually be loud, but was deafening in the quiet slumber of the tent. It was so typically *teenage*. Sneaking in after half-groping the entire night, trying not to wake anyone up. If Will closed his eyes, he could almost imagine he was home, and he'd be able to live like this forever, without the pain and loss that the Games brought. When he opened his eyes, there was only reality.

“I've never done this before,” Hannibal whispered once they were wrapped up in the sleeping bag together, laughter dying down. His face was close and Will could probably count each individual eyelash if he tried. Perhaps reality wasn't so bad.

“Kissed anyone?”

“I've kissed people before,” Hannibal corrected. “I've done all number of things. But love… love like this. It's unfamiliar to me.”

“You loved your sister, I presume.”

“My love for her was vastly different to my love for you.”

“I guess that was more… sisterly.”

Hannibal was laughing again, quiet and vulnerable in the silence, stifling it in the curve of Will's shoulder and collarbone. He was dizzyingly close, and Will had to fight the heat that rushed through him at that. They'd done nothing but kiss tonight, unable to stop themselves but still aware that cameras were capturing the whole thing. Some modicum of restraint had to be shown. Even in here, away from the Capitol's watchful eyes, they weren't alone. Bev and Peter still slept on soundly. If they died in the arena, privacy was a luxury that they would never have.

“I suppose sisterly would be an adequate adjective to use, yes,” Hannibal agreed, after sobering up and shifting his head back so he could look at Will again. His eyes eventually slid down to Will's mouth, lidded as he stared. “Sisterly is decidedly not an emotion I feel towards you.”

“I should hope not,” was his murmured reply. He shut his eyes and swallowed, only realising after that Hannibal was watching the way his throat bobbed. “It's unfamiliar for me too.”

“You didn't love your girlfriend?” Hannibal questioned, surprised. When Will opened his eyes, Hannibal was frowning.

“I told you I didn't. I never got the chance,” he admitted, a little sad. He'd liked Molly a *lot*. But he'd been equally as infatuated with Hannibal at the time, and had even gone and fallen in love with him while he was at it. It hadn't been fair on her. With sinking guilt, he realised she'd probably watched that whole scene outside unfold. There was nobody watching that could've dismissed that as fake, not even Molly. It can't have been easy for her to watch.

“I suppose this is a first for both of us,” Hannibal said, full with excitement. Will let his gaze trace the jut of his cheekbones, where a rare flush of pink lay.

“Does that please you?”

“More than you know.”

“What else pleases you?”

“You,” he breathed. “Your eyes. Your mouth. Your hair. Your kiss.”

“Why do you always sound like you're reciting poetry?” Will wondered, feeling his eyes crinkle with humour, amusement creasing his expression.

“If you'd like to hear some of my poetry about you-”

“Please, *no*,” he interrupted, and then they were laughing like before, uncontrollable and inconvenient. He didn't remember ever laughing like this with Hannibal. He didn't remember the last time he laughed like this at *all*. A while ago, definitely. Laughter had been rare after last year. Prolonged laughter, anyway. There was something liberating about it, like even if it were only for a few short minutes, nothing mattered. So what if they were in an arena with trained killers who were trying to kill them? So what if even outside the arena, people with power wanted them dead? They were laughing, and that was that.

“I'll refrain from subjecting you to it in the future,” Hannibal vowed, mirth still twisting his mouth. “I can't promise it won't bleed into my natural speech, however. I forget myself when I'm with you.”

“*Stop*,” Will protested weakly. “You're into me, I get it.”

He *did* want Hannibal to stop. But he also… didn't. Little sparks of adrenaline chased down his spine every time Hannibal mentioned his love for him. Everything was fresh and new, like the first day of winter, when crisp snow layered the ground. Waking up, he'd open the

curtains to a white world that had been created while he and the rest of Panem slept on, unaware. It was the start of a new season.

Hannibal leant forward to kiss him again, drawn to his lips like they held some great gravitational pull, and as their mouths still cold from outside pressed together, Will could could only think of winter.

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Sleeping a few hours was better than getting no sleep at all, but after a little while on the move, his slight deprivation began to take its toll. On any ordinary day he'd be completely fine, and make it through the day without an issue, but days in the arena couldn't be described as ordinary. It was constant work, whether that was through hiking or simply staying alert as long as possible. He was only thankful there was a group of them, most of whom had gotten enough sleep, meaning alertness wasn't a necessity as they trudged through the rainforest. He could rely on them to warn him of any impending danger.

Although that wasn't to say that the others weren't at all distracted. Georgia was glancing over to him and Hannibal every so often with a smirk on her face, and eventually Beverly caught wind of it, taking one look at them and trying to hide her dawning realisation. He knew she'd be desperate to hear all about it, but probably wouldn't ask until they were alone. Peter seemed lost in his head. Like always. Perhaps if somebody jumped out of the trees at them, everyone would be too preoccupied with the shift in his and Hannibal's dynamic to notice.

Walking along beside Hannibal almost gave him deja vu. It felt as though he was back in the arena from last year all over again, with Hannibal as some dangerous, omniscient being that he did not yet understand. This was a little like that. They'd been friends for a long time, but any genuine romance between them? That was unmarked territory. Hannibal certainly wasn't unknown to him anymore, but this side of him was something Will had yet to discover. The idea of understanding it, understanding *him*, was just as exhilarating as last time, only without that tiny dash of fear that had previously accompanied it. He only wished he didn't have to understand it on camera.

“C-can you h-hear that?” It was Peter. He'd stopped in the middle of the track, frown plastered on his forehead. He seemed to be straining to listen to something, head tilted and eyes unfocused.

“Hear what?”

Bev was right to question it. All Will could hear were crickets and birds, and the wind in the trees. They couldn't take chances, however. If Peter was hearing something, they shouldn't dismiss it as a delusion right away- that could cost them their lives. For all they knew, Dolarhyde was hiding amongst the undergrowth in wait for them.

“The water,” Peter answered, like it was obvious.

“There isn't any water, Peter,” Hannibal explained softly, but Peter only shook his head desperately.

“Th-there *is*,” he insisted, and went stumbling in some other direction, sending them chasing after him like fools.

Maybe it was their thundering footfalls that prevented them from hearing anything until the last minute, slowing down as Peter did, following him around a curve in the rainforest which opened up into a deep jut in the earth, where a body of water lay, just as Peter had claimed. Maybe it was because the concept of not believing him was so ingrained in them all. They said they believed him over Ingram, and they *did*, but there was an element of unreliability that accompanied Peter Bernardone that they couldn't seem to unlearn. It was cruel, and they'd almost lost water because of it. It just went to show how deep the Capitol had its claws in, even when they thought they were free.

“*Oh*,” someone whispered, entirely accidental, let out on a breath and carried into the wind, and Will didn't turn to see who. He *couldn't* turn to see who, couldn't drag his eyes away, but he understood.

The Gamemakers were torturous and sadistic, but Will couldn't deny them their art. It was *beautiful*. A freefall of water cascaded down the rocks opposite them, deafening and endless, a waterfall that led to a deep lagoon, almost turquoise in colour. But it wasn't just turquoise. It was cyan and cerulean and sapphire, stretching into jade and emerald where it was clearly deeper. Despite the rush and ferocity of the waterfall, the lagoon remained mostly undisturbed, the water so still it put his nerves on edge. Even at the point where the water hit the lagoon, falling from the rocks, it still barely made an impact, only sending out tiny little ripples of disruption. Sunlight that escaped through the canopy glinted off the water, skipping across its surface like stones, like tiny daggers of the day. It was perhaps the most striking sight he'd ever seen in an arena, alight with personal flourishes and passionate workmanship, the lagoon like a painters canvas, a mess of colours so stunning he felt as if his human eyes weren't worthy enough to witness them. It was like the Gamemakers had twirled a paintbrush around and produced a masterpiece.

More than that, it was *inviting*. With the trees crowded over it, and the canopy blocking it from sunlight too harsh, it looked deliciously cool, a lovely respite to their long and hot hours of walking.

Another bead of sweat ran down his neck, and this time, he could no longer hesitate, dropping his pack and tearing off his shirt, going to work on the straps of his pants.

“What are you-”

“Swimming. Washing. For the first time in days,” he interrupted Georgia, not unkindly, but with a heaving sense of desperation.

He could feel Hannibal's eyes on his bare chest, and a little more of everything made sense. He could only try to fight the flush that threatened his dangerously exposed skin, busying himself with stripping off and hearing the others start to do the same. He regretfully left his underwear on, feeling especially protective of his privacy after last night's intimacy, that he had shared with all of Panem. Jumping into the lagoon was a blessing when he'd finally kicked his shoes off- he wanted to be hidden from their omniscient gaze as soon as possible.

The water was cool but not cold, a sweet relief on his warm skin, soothing the sweat from him. Submerging himself below the surface entirely felt like home, like he was beneath the river looking up, as if when he emerged again he'd be in District 4, Abigail and his mother waiting at home for him with a fresh meal on the table. He longed for it, for that lost innocence and simplicity of life that he hadn't appreciated while he still could.

His hair was long enough that it floated around his head visibly, browning seaweed, murky and whimsical all at once. It reminded him of Abigail.

When she was much younger, as he was in turn, he'd wash her hair for her. It was perhaps how they'd grown so close at the beginning, despite not being related by any blood or previous friendship. He'd watched the soap suds disappear into the saturated strands of her hair and been transfixed by it all, watching as they reappeared again when he put them under water once more. She'd liked to pretend she was a mermaid from the depths of the ocean, in that childish way that had bonded them the way that siblings do. When she went fully underwater, it had really looked like it, the water transforming her hair into something truly mythical, a halo of hair around her head that in his youth, he'd genuinely believed to be related to some fantastical creature from the picture books he'd found in the forbidden room at the library.

As he'd grown older, he'd realised that was simply what hair looked like underwater. He'd stopped washing it for her as *she* grew older, aware that they both needed certain amounts of privacy in the way that all siblings do. It was funny how the magic left as children grew.

Now, his hair looked almost like that, like a creature from another world. His lungs had begun to strain with the effort of it all and his eyes were stinging. He suspected that was partly because of the tears that had started building there, a side effect of that homesickness that encompassed his heart in a deadly and specific way, gutting him like his father used to gut fishes. As he came up for air, feet pressing into the pebbles at the bottom of the lagoon, he was almost tempted by the notion of not returning to the surface at all. Then he saw Hannibal, and changed his mind.

“Is it nice to get in the water again?” he asked, wading over to Will.

“It's great. Especially in this heat.” He sighed, watching the water part around his waist. “I'm tired of sweat sticking to my skin.”

“Have you been getting nightmares in here?”

“No. It's just really hot.”

Hannibal laughed, shifting ever-closer. This was the most Will had heard him laugh in the entirety of their acquaintance, open and involuntary, charming. His expression may have been humorous, but his gaze was heat and fire, curling down to Will's chest every so often, following along the protrusion of his collarbone. His tongue darted out to wet his lips, making Will warm all over again, almost proving their swim in the lagoon to be pointless. But it was that different kind of warmth, the one he'd felt last night and so many other times in Hannibal's presence. It was warmth that made him *want*, rather than just sweaty and

uncomfortable. The intensity was feverish between them, and Will was acutely aware of their lower stomach's almost touching, feet skimming each other under the water.

A thumb brushed his cheek, tender and gentle, such a contrast to the brutality Hannibal seemed to yearn for. “Kiss me?” he breathed, bashful, hopeful, a high and heady flush dusting his cheeks.

Will did, ignoring the happy laughter echoing from the others some distance away. Electric leaped between them as their mouths pressed together, as Hannibal's hands shot to his waist, as there was a splash of water behind them and a shocked yell. The air seemed to crumble around them, trapping them in the moment as they kissed. It sparked, lit up like those fireworks over Verger's mansion, tumbling and freewheeling into the endless sky. They tore apart from one another in shock, spinning round just as a whatever had fallen bobbed back up again, a cannon sounding as it did.

The cannon told them everything they needed to know. When they saw the bloody body of a fallen tribute, floating in the shallow waters below the waterfall, it was no longer a surprise.

Chapter 24

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“It was likely the fall that killed him,” Hannibal explained. They'd dragged the body onto dry land, where Hannibal had begun peering into its eyes and examining its severe back wounds. “But he was already close to death. Very close. The impact with the water simply was too much for his system to handle.”

“What *happened* to him?” Bev questioned, kneeling down to get a closer look at the mangled skin of the corpse's back.

“The skin itself has been ripped off. Quite violently,” Hannibal observed. “How, though… I couldn't tell you.”

“I'm assuming this was done by another tribute, and not himself.”

“Almost definitely. But to be so needlessly cruel with a victim in the Games, especially the second time around, is barbaric. Not to mention illogical. The killer was probably one of the less mentally stable victors.”

It sobered them up more than they already had. It was a harsh reminder of exactly where they were, exactly the threats that surrounded them, threats that by distance, probably weren't that far away. He felt Peter trembling beside him, and could only cling onto his arm for comfort that extended both ways, really. The corpse was vile, blood clumped amongst half-torn skin, and what the corpse meant was even worse, in some ways. Somebody out there was doing this to tributes. Next, it could be them. What a way to die.

Will had scarcely paid attention to the other victors since he'd entered the arena. A mere six of them had died in the bloodbath at the Cornocopia, and to his knowledge, it was only Pimms and the body before him that had died since then. It left sixteen tributes remaining, including them. There were eleven others out there. Dolarhyde and his girlfriend were among them for sure, and he had no doubt in his mind that Ingram was alive and well. The other tributes were a mystery to him, however, likely among victors he had never paid that much attention to, either because they weren't interesting or he didn't view them as a threat.

He had to say, he slightly regretted that now.

Against all the odds, the body count in the original bloodbath had been at an all time low, shocking considering the supposed skill and prowess of the majority of tributes in here. But there were over half of them left, already a few days in. There was a part of him that wished desperately for the others to simply kill one another off, knocking down the number of victors as they went, far increasing his chance of survival. But another part knew the drawbacks of that scenario. If they all died, and there were only the five of them still standing, what then? Would he have to kill Georgia or Peter? He didn't particularly want to. He *would*, of course, to protect himself or Hannibal or Bev, but that didn't mean he *wanted* to.

Which brought him to the worst possible outcome of all.

He was alive, so was Hannibal, and so was Beverly. Nobody else.

Verger wouldn't spare them a second time, Will was sure of it. If they three were the last ones there, they'd be expected to fight to the death. There wouldn't be more than one victor this year, no matter what the public of the Capitol desired. That situation was a dreaded one, especially because in part, Will had no idea what would happen. He certainly wouldn't kill either of them, and he liked to believe neither of them would kill him. Whether they'd kill each other or not was mostly tied to his own happiness, which he hoped the other two cared about enough to understand that the murder of one of his friends would devastate him, something that they might not want.

Who was he kidding. One of them had to survive. He just couldn't allow it to be him.

“Are you alright?” It was Hannibal, crowding up close to him. Will had been so zoned out he hadn't noticed him moving away from the body on the forest floor, had entirely missed as Bev had begun gathering supplies and getting ready to leave.

“Fine. It's… jarring. That's all.”

“I know,” he murmured, hand curling around Will's cheek and thumb brushing the rim of his ear. He leant forward, letting his lips press against Will's forehead. “I'm sorry,” he said into Will's hair.

“It isn't your fault.”

“I don't like seeing you in pain.”

“It's nothing, really.”

“It's not nothing.”

If anything, Hannibal sounded *sad*. It wasn't an emotion Will had heard from him much, had vaguely seen it between the lines when they talked about his sister, but hadn't glimpsed it since. There was a vulnerability in it, but not in that fun way where he was simply soft because he wanted Will, but in a treacherous, heart-throbbing way that struck that flicker of romanticism in him, the part that truly didn't enjoy watching the person he loved despair.

There wasn't much to say. There wasn't much that he could do to cheer him up, a fact that he was fully aware of. Where was the silver lining in a place like this?

But he had Hannibal. That would surely be enough to struggle through it, through whatever horrors Verger and the Gamemakers had in store for him. Pulling away from the embrace, he gazed up into Hannibal's eyes, maroon in the light of day and filled with sorrowful adoration as they fixed on Will.

Perhaps silver wasn't the only colour that meant hope. Perhaps Hannibal's eyes were all he needed.

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It was almost as if the sight of the lagoon had transformed his entire view of the arena. Things seemed brighter, more vivid, the vegetation a blinding green and the assorted splashes of flowers here and there a mess of reds and blues and yellows, a rainbow of the rainforest, so unnatural yet so beautiful. He wondered if he'd still be able to see it after he closed his eyes, the way he'd not stopped dreaming of the arena last year. Sometimes he'd awaken to the memory of birdsong and bluebells, fireflies flitting across his mind and the rush of cool night air on his skin. He'd forget he was warm in his bed, waking up and still believing he was hiding in some rock cave somewhere, with numerous hungry tributes out there just waiting to kill him. Then he'd remember he was safe, and feel sick at the flare of disappointed longing he felt.

It had probably been him missing Hannibal, but he couldn't be sure. It could just be that brutal darkness in him that he steadfastly ignored, igniting at the idea of deadly situations.

He'd being trying to dismiss the existence of that darkness, but it was hard when it only took the sight of blood to remind him of Tier, jaw caving in below the work of his hands, blood sinking into his fists that were clenched so tightly it felt as if the blood was permeating his very skin, making Tier a part of him forever, a part of his veins. He'd wanted to consume him. It was worrying, so he'd pretended as if those emotions he'd experienced were a fluke, or that he was remembering incorrectly, but he knew the truth.

He'd enjoyed it.

“Turns out you're more than just 'convincing',” Georgia remarked, falling into step beside him. There was a smile plastered on her face, and Will nearly jolted at the lack of exhaustion forming it. Her smile was carefree, joyful, *alive*. He hadn't seen her smile like that since her interviews before the Games.

“Let's not go there,” he replied sulkily, and she laughed at his response.

“Why not?”

“I already know I'll be getting an earful from Bev, when we finally talk. Don't you go there too.”

“Everyone knew.”

“*Don't*.”

She chuckled again, but otherwise fell silent, sending a hush between them that wasn't at all uncomfortable. It felt natural, like he'd known Georgia his whole life, so much so that he could even read the nuances in her smiles. They were similar in lots of ways, he thought. In a different world, in that lurid fantasy where Hannibal grew up in District 4 with him, she was there too, as was Peter. None of them had gone through ordeals like this. They remained unmarked by the cruelty of the world and the unfair dictatorship of the Capitol. They had safety and stability, something that all of the victors deserved, even the especially evil ones like Dolarhyde or Ingram. Maybe they wouldn't have turned out so rotten if it weren't for

what they were forced into, only as teenagers, long before this tense and surprisingly bloody aftermath of all their Games. There was no use entertaining the impossible, but he wasn't able to stop his brain from conjuring the images, sometimes.

“I think I'm happier,” Georgia said after a while, conflict and hesitation rife in her tone. “Don't get me wrong, I hate it in here and I don't want to die. But also...”

“You're at peace with it?” Will finished for her, and she glanced up at him, understanding slipping into her expression. “Me too. It sucks, and I know it does. But I've accepted I'm going to die, now. Might as well enjoy life while I can.”

“It's exactly that,” she agreed, sad and smiling. “There's a freedom in death. You're right. I was here thinking there was something wrong with me.”

“There's something wrong with all of us. Something deeply wrong, that can't be fixed. It occurred the minute we stepped into our first arena.”

“I disagree,” she mused. “Don't denounce recovery. We *can* be fixed- but only after we're dead.”

“And what then?”

The look she shot him was both exasperated and amused, drifting across the distance between them. He knew it was a stupid question, but he was *curious*. What did Georgia think came next?

“How would I know?” she retorted, an eyebrow raised in his direction. “Nothingness? An eternal afterlife? Either way, all this will be gone. Either way, I'll be free.”

“You have an odd definition of freedom.”

“My definition of freedom is anything other than this.”

Maybe it wasn't so odd after all. Georgia had spent longer outside the arena than him, in that numb in-between period that he hadn't realised was in-between anything, assuming it was simply the epilogue, and that he was safe. She likely understood it better than him, the conundrum of being free and not free, all at once. The illusion of liberation. They'd lived with a form of that all their lives, had been subjected to it just because they were born in a District, but it had been so much worse afterwards. They were traumatised and aware, two truly horrible things.

He could comprehend her desire to die, no doubt about it. But he couldn't *connect*, could only think of Beverly and Hannibal and Abigail; of home, sea air and meadows of bluebells, hot sand between his fingers. Dying didn't appeal to him as much as he wished it did, he'd wanted so badly for it to be easy, something that he could just embrace with open arms. That wasn't the case. He'd surely resist for as long as possible, fight to live another day until the arena and the tributes finally got the best of him. His death would be far more of a struggle than Georgia's. His death wouldn't be a final peace, it would be an uncomfortable and failed determination. He wasn't sure which outlook was better.

“Let's hope you're right,” he eventually spoke, voice gently breaking through the quiet that had formed.

Her smile was tired again.

Whatever tranquillity existed amongst them vanished within seconds, snapping like a rubber band as the cannon sounded twice in succession, the two explosions in his ears like physical blows. Heart rocketing against his ribcage in shock, he watched as Hannibal stopped dead where he was leading the way, signalling for them to stop behind him, sword extended out in front of him like a shield. For all they knew, the killer could be mere metres away, hidden by the thick foliage of the canopy.

Minutes ticked by. All Will could hear was his pulse racing in his ears and his heavy breathing, syncing up with Georgia's in turn. The sounds of the jungle continued, distant animal sounds and insects surrounding them. The cannon fired again, and Will could see that Peter had started shaking where he was standing a few metres in front of them, not calming under Bev's kind grip on his arm, which was valiantly attempting to still his trembling. This all seemed to have come in a rush, there had been days of a drought, of absolutely no death, and now the hurricane. Four people, all in the last few hours. Somebody out there was getting busy.

“W-what's happening?”

Will expected Hannibal to shush him, cruel but necessary. Instead, ever-surprising, Hannibal released from his defensive position, tension bleeding from his posture, dropping the sword and turning to Peter, gripping his hands on his shoulders. Will recognised it, that comfort Hannibal had given him as they'd been dragged away from one another after the Games. His hands had been heavy and grounding. His voice had been a fixed point in the universe, the only thing tethering him to sanity. Will hoped it would mean similar things for Peter.

“Nothing. It's over,” Hannibal assured. “We're fine.”

“W-what-”

“People died,” he explained. “People died, and Clark was perhaps amongst them. This could be a good thing, Peter.”

Will didn't think Peter had once in his life viewed death as a good thing- he wasn't the type. But his shoulders slouched under the weight of Hannibal's hands, his head hanging and quivering slowly ceasing. He'd been surprised by both of them. Hannibal's soft side, out here in the open for someone other than Will, and Peter's sad acceptance of what Will was sure that to him, was a horrific truth.

Evening stretched around them. Hannibal met his eyes over Peter's shoulder. Will smiled.

Chapter End Notes

torn between basking in the excitement of the new star wars movie and the dread and despair of sunday evening. hope you all had a good weekend!

Chapter 25

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Silvestri had been one of the less memorable victors for sure. Will had barely noticed anything about him during the training period, and had no recollection of his Games at all. They'd been when he was a child, Hannibal informed him, but it didn't help him remember. As Silvestri lay before them, dead, he only felt pity and a touch of adrenaline. He looked even weaker dead than he had in life, his broken body crumpled in front of them like roadkill, forgotten, helpless. Will wondered how many people were at home waiting for him, how many people viewed him as the complete *opposite* to forgettable.

There weren't many people for Wells, however.

As the oldest victor in here, he likely didn't have the same network of friends and relatives that Will assumed Silvestri did. He'd lived old and alone in that great big house that all victors were given, yearning for nothing but another chance in the arena, one of those victors who were simply waiting. Biding their time until they could kill, because they'd gotten a taste of it in here and didn't want to give it up, were endlessly hungry for more. It was one of the many paradigms of human nature- there were too many victors like this. So many victors that Will was sick with it, their desires resting in his throat like bile. But their population seemed to be declining, one by one. That was the only good thing to come out of this Quarter Quell.

Hannibal was standing next to him, grinning. Blood was tinting the whites of his surprisingly crooked teeth a fading and chipped red, the colour of roses in bloom, except this wasn't exactly a celebration of new life. It was the celebration of ending one.

But that had always been their fate, hadn't it?

***

Dawn had risen above the horizon a few hours prior. The horizon wasn't visible from their position on the ground, below the thick ceiling of greenery, but as light began shining through the trees, he knew it was morning. He'd felt it was his responsibility to take a watch after the other night, allowing Georgia to step in and replace him and Hannibal when it hadn't technically been her turn. After the day they'd had yesterday, the swim in the lagoon, the body, the cannons… combined with the few hours sleep he *had* gotten afterwards, he felt fairly awake.

Unzipping and shuffling from behind him told him the others could be awaking too, emerging from the tent and into the arena. That was one of the hardest parts about waking up in the arena every morning- for a second, if he was lucky a full minute, he could imagine he was somewhere else. He was camping in the woods at home. He was free, he was anywhere but here. Beyond those thin cloth walls of the tent, was a world that was entirely his.

Then he exited the tent, and remembered where he was.

Now, turning, he watched in near-awe as Hannibal emerged like a god into the sunlight, golden rays of it twining down and reaching him as he tilted his head to gaze at the canopy. He looked like some deity made up of riches and splendour. Will's breath caught in his chest, and felt like that first moment all over again. That moment he'd seen Hannibal on the tape, stepping forward to volunteer himself, just another well-dressed tribute who'd likely become a victor, he'd been unable to deny that he was beautiful. Hannibal looked like that now, the sun shadowing his cheeks, his eyes like fireworks in the light of day.

“Good morning,” Hannibal was murmuring, but Will wasn't listening, only staring at his mouth as he formed the words. Then Hannibal was leaning over and kissing him, hungry and delighted as he claimed what he wanted, which Will was now freely giving. Hannibal's mouth was warm and he tasted of the berries they'd feasted on last night, a sweet tang invading Will's mouth as he returned Hannibal's ardent kisses. He couldn't quite manage to pull away.

It was only when Hannibal's hand, after travelling below his thin shirt, brushed the bare skin of his waist did he stop him with a reluctant grip on his wrist.

“The cameras,” he reminded, severing their kiss and firmly moving Hannibal's wandering hands away.

Hannibal seemed to realise himself, clearing his throat and straightening up, taking a pointed step away from where Will was sat on a nearby rock. There was something utterly fascinating about the way he reigned himself in like this, shifting from the soft lover that Will knew so well to the cold and hardened killer that so many tributes had seen before their deaths. There was some pure monster in him that always remained there, beyond the façade of the polite gentleman he put up, and beyond the true softness he carried when he was with Will, almost involuntarily. That was the unnatural part, the part he was only just learning. The real man behind the mask wasn't a man at all. He was an animal.

He was the man who had choked the very life from Matthew Brown, likely seeing veins throb in his forehead and his skin stain purple and red with lack of oxygen, and had done it without flinching, without allowing any emotion onto his face besides unfiltered rage.

Because Hannibal's love was soft. It was soft and adoring and Will had never seen anything like it. But where it wasn't soft, it was hard. Hard and possessive and angry, yearning to covet and protect and *mark*, in such a violent and primal way. Desire curled through him at that, the memory of Hannibal's snarl as he leapt to fight Budge, receiving blow after blow to both his physicality and his dignity. Hannibal was a proud man. Will knew he couldn't be happy with his presentation to the Capitol, not as the well-mannered intellectual he'd previously imagined, but as the lovestruck fool who showed vulnerability on a semi-regular basis. Using their love as a showcase had been a crude and ostentatious move on Verger's part, one that he had distaste for and *knew* Hannibal did too, but was conflicted by the fact that it got them results. Despite how uncomfortable the experience had been, it was what had kept them so favoured amongst the whimsical wealth of the Capitol.

One thing to thank Verger for didn't absolve him of all blame, though. Will would do well not to forget that.

“Has the arena grown on you at all?” Hannibal asked a little while later, having joined him on the rock and broken into more of their food supplies, sharing crackers and cheese and sipping from their recently refilled flask of water.

“I doubt it'll ever 'grow on me'. The arenas are funeral homes.”

“You mentioned something about preferring last time.”

“Oh, that was about the heat,” Will elaborated. “I'm not a fan. It makes everything sticky and uncomfortable.”

“Heat can be nice. Less layers. More time spent outside.”

“Cold can be nice too,” he argued. “Cosy fireplaces. Warm drinks. That's my favourite time of year. This isn't an enjoyable arena for me- maybe if we stayed constantly at the lagoon I could bear it, but...”

“You spend a lot of your summers swimming?”

“Oh, most of them. Summers can get really hot in District four, and I can't say it's to my liking.”

Heat was growing on him, however. Hannibal was heat, burning, scorching him where they touched. Will felt dizzy with it.

But he couldn't afford to let that affect him, not in here. He had to stay level-headed, marching onwards as they began their trek through the rainforest later that day, slashing through the greenery ahead. The days had started blending into one, recently, becoming a blur of death and kisses and humidity. Except for a few private moments with Hannibal here and there and the frequent cannons, his time spent in the arena hadn't really been all that different, simply days on end of trudging through a dense jungle, trying not to overheat.

Perhaps it was wrong to complain about the mundanities of the arena. It wasn't as if he'd prefer things to be *exciting*, which in the view of the Games, would mean people dying left and right.

Today was quieter. The morning had been almost *too* peaceful. Too lovely, spent kissing Hannibal under the sunrise they couldn't see. Maybe that was an indicator, and maybe he should've guessed something was about to happen, but he didn't quite realise until it was too late. Pausing for Bev to take a breather sometime in late afternoon was only another day in the arena, allowing her to get her strength back and rest her ankle. It was something that happened, something that they did. The nerve damage was still prominent, affecting her slightly from day to day so that she had to often take breaks from their long travels through the arena. Right up to the reaping, she'd had to do exercises every day to improve the healing of her ankle. It was just who she was now.

Then they heard the yelling. It echoed throughout the trees, sending birds fluttering away in a panicked flurry, hitting Will like a shock to the chest, sending Hannibal moving oddly in front of him. Bev was still crumpled on the ground against a tree, looking breathless and

confused, Georgia crouched beside her and delicately tending to her ankle, freezing when she heard. Everyone stiffened at the sound of it, unaccompanied by a cannon, some far off place in the jungle.

There were a few seconds where nobody spoke, stuck and terrified in the moment after it, not knowing what they could be about to suffer. Personal suffering seemed unlikely, but whatever was going on couldn't be good.

“What do we do?” Bev wondered aloud, shaking and helpless where she sat. Her ankle was weak, and while she would be able to get up and run away if necessary, it wouldn't do her any good. And Will assumed it would hurt like hell.

“We look,” Hannibal answered. “Peter and Georgia, I'd recommend you remain here with Beverly. Beverly needs someone to look after her ankle as we go, but this could be a trap to lure some of us away. Georgia...”

“I'm the most capable,” she sighed, obviously not happy about having to stay behind, away from the action, unaware of what was happening. “Yeah, you're probably right. We'll wait here a while.”

Hannibal nodded at her, dropping his pack, grabbing a sword and dragging Will away, and that was that. Will realised he'd not had a say in it at all, barely had time to process it, even, and had blindly followed Hannibal's instructions. That was the way things worked between them: Hannibal said jump and he asked how high. He couldn't stop himself, hadn't even tried, and realised he wouldn't want to. Gazing at Hannibal's side profile in the dying light, orange and green glowing along the lines of his cheeks, fondness seized Will like heavy alcohol, surprising him at how much he relished in the control he gave Hannibal. It was intoxicating. Thrilling. An addiction he didn't think he'd ever put an end to.

An addiction he didn't *want* to put an end to.

Silvestri was leaning over Wells as the two of them came into perspective, an unexpected duo in an even more unexpected position. Silvestri's hands were pressed tight over Wells' side, stilling blood that was pouring over his fingers despite his tight grip. Worry creased his brow and sweat was dripping off of him like rain as he folded his hands against what Will could only imagine was a gaping wound, rich and red with Wells' life force. He jumped at the sound of them crunching over dead leaves and twigs, almost letting his hands slip, but realising himself just in time, even more stress creeping onto his expression.

“Please,” he said. “Just let me save him.”

Despair and desperation lined his tone. Hannibal stepped forward, presumably to kill them, but Will stopped him with a tight clutch on his arm. Hannibal glanced at him in shock, disappointment, and a little bit of anger.

“It wouldn't be right,” Will argued. “Not while they're like this.”

Hannibal's nostrils flared, and Will imagined him a bloodhound, a vampire, so close and aroused by the scent of blood, and furious when denied it at the last minute. Will realised

then that while Hannibal had a great amount of control over him, it went the other way, too. If anybody else had attempted to stop him from killing, Will couldn't see Hannibal listening and changing his mind. But when Will asked… Hannibal complied, irritated but utterly obedient.

“Weakness at its finest, Devon.”

The wheezing voice came from Wells, who Will hadn't even bothered to look at after he'd seen him incapacitated on the ground. He was pale and sickly-looking, but certainly still conscious, face screwed up in pain and chest heaving with painful breaths. There was distaste infiltrating his tone at Hannibal's restraint, and his eyes were squinting at where Will's hand met Hannibal's elbow. He could feel the judgement, tangible amongst them all, thick like treacle in the air. Wells' manner was one of uneasieness and offence, some deep-seated disgust that Will didn't need to look further at to understand. The idea of two men together wasn't appealing to all, was quite frankly appalling to some, and Wells appeared to be one of those people, staring in undisguised hatred at their undeniably intimate physical contact.

Whether or not he'd believed their ruse from before was irrelevant. The way Will had restrained Hannibal through mere touch was evidence enough.

“What's wrong with him?” Will asked, the question directed anywhere other than Wells.

“Kidney failure,” came Silvestri's short answer as he fumbled through the first aid kit with one hand, searching for something that Will couldn't hope to understand.

“Are you trying to *remove* them?” Hannibal questioned, incredulous.

“Just one. To alleviate the discomfort.”

“I...” Hannibal was at a rare loss for words, floundering for something to say. Will supposed from the expression on his face and lack of sentences he was stringing together, whatever Silvestri was doing was bad. He turned to Wells, only slightly wincing as Silvestri prodded at his side. “How long has this been going on?”

“Years,” Wells admitted darkly. “I thought I had longer. It's become… urgent.”

“And that was you yelling?” Will interjected.

He glared up at Will. “I think you'll find that kidney surgery while you're conscious is fairly painful.”

“Right. Of course.”

And then Wells was dropping his head into the crook of his arm, moaning in agony as Silvestri made an especially precise movement with his arm, leaving Will and Hannibal with quite the dilemma. Well, *Will* with a dilemma. He knew full well what Hannibal's solution would be, what his own solution *should* be, considering this was the Games, but was having trouble accepting it. Killing them felt *wrong*, somehow, seeing them so powerless and unable to defend themselves. Every other person he had killed had been because they were attacking him. Never had he murdered someone in cold blood.

“What do you suggest we do?” Hannibal asked in a low voice, and it was obvious from his tone that he was irritated. Will felt pangs of guilt and conflict, waging their war inside him.

“I don't know.”

Agonising confusion finally invaded his expression, sending him frowning and pouting at the forest floor, unsure of whether tears were about to make their way into the picture. Hannibal sighed, freeing the sword from his clasp, watching Will's face shift in panic, and pulled him further away from the odd little surgery taking place a few metres from them.

“Will,” he said, hushed and soft. “I didn't mean to upset you. But what are we supposed to do with them? Let them *go?*”

“No,” he answered, voice racked with tremors. He looked up at Hannibal, letting him see the slight sheen of wetness that had gathered in his eyes. Hannibal's breath caught at the sight of it, sorrow spreading across his face like a ripple in a pond. “We kill them.”

Sudden shifting and murmuring caught his attention, and was the cause of him drawing back and turning to see Silvestri shuffling back from where he was crouched over Wells, looking through the medical supplies. Wells released a whimper as he moved, attempting to shift upwards, helped by Silvestri's steady hands. Once more, exhaled, and from then on it was a blur.

One of his hands, which had been clenched in the mud, snatched up a scalpel and flew up to Silvestri's face, lodging it in his eye, sending him careering backwards with a shocked yell. Will and Hannibal were still where they stood, watching as Wells crawled over Silvestri where he was now on his back, pushing the scalpel further into his eye until he went limp and the cannon sounded with haunting finality.

“Weakness,” Wells murmured.

Will barely processed it before he was reaching for Hannibal's sword and swinging at Wells' head, nearly gasping as it met bone and flesh and nerve, triggering the cannon and making Wells fall to the ground, now a dead man. Will sank to the forest floor next to him, hauling him onto his back. He was old and frail, but he'd been tough during life. The lines of his face made him look war-worn. Blood gushed out of him like a waterfall, and Will felt it with his fingers, warm and sticky.

“Will,” Hannibal whispered behind him, rapt.

Will rose, feeling like a monster as he towered over the bodies. Then Hannibal was spinning him, kissing him, cupping his face, groaning like they were somewhere far away from this forsaken place. But to Hannibal, of course, it wasn't forsaken at all. This was where he thrived. Took to murder like a duck to water, like it was a skill he'd known all his life. Arguably, he had.

Pulling away, Will pressed a thumb against Hannibal's lips, pushed until they parted. Hannibal's pupils were blown wide and his breathing was laboured. He looked utterly

besotted, endlessly aroused. Will pushed until he was touching Hannibal's teeth, the teeth of a predator, leaving smudges of blood in his wake. Blood and desire. They went hand in hand.

This had always been their fate.

Chapter End Notes

tried a different format with this chapter, hope it was okay :)

Chapter 26

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Night was beginning by the time they made it back to the others. Hannibal had kissed him, and kissed him some more, and before Will had known it, he'd been pressed against the ground, bloody hands tangling through Hannibal's light hair. Want had lived in him, restless and violent like the ocean.

“Will Graham,” Hannibal had murmured against his cheek, “the great love of my life.”

Then he'd licked a stripe along Will's jaw. Will was sure he tasted of sweat and blood.

Such a warm welcome hadn't been expected, but that wasn't to say he didn't accept Bev's desperate hug with a surprised smile, grasping her back. It was then that he realised just how long they'd been gone, and how the sound of two cannons likely hadn't been much of a comfort after they hadn't reappeared for a while. Bev pressed her face into his shoulder, and he felt the wetness of her tears soak through the fabric of his shirt.

“You were gone,” she choked out. “I thought you were gone.”

“I'm sorry. Things got out of hand.”

“When you weren't back after an hour we got a little worried,” Georgia offered. “Bev's ankle was fine, but there was this mutt. And then, Peter… we couldn't really leave him.”

“She wouldn't let me go alone,” Bev explained, stepping away and wiping her eyes as inconspicuously as possible, ducking her head and sniffling.

“What happened?” Hannibal asked, crouching by Peter's side. He was curled against the same tree Bev had been when they'd left her, cradling his arm and shaking. Hannibal pried his fingers away, revealing three deep scratches that were slowly oozing blood and puss.

“Some lizard… thing,” Georgia answered. There was one of their axes on the ground covered in blood that was spilling against the leaves crowded around it, lying by Georgia's feet. “I hurt it pretty bad. It ran away. But not before...” She gestured lamely at Peter's arm, that Hannibal was now examining with medical precision.

“It's infected,” he eventually observed. “But not naturally- infection wouldn't occur this fast. I think it's poison. The mutt must've had it in its claws.”

“S-sorry.”

“You don't need to apologise,” Will whispered in near-horror, shocked every time at Peter's manner. He was so used to being hated, and it broke Will's heart. He looked to Hannibal. “What do we do?”

“The first aid kit.”

“We don't have-”

Bev was cut off by Will's production of the first aid kit they'd stolen from Silvestri and Wells, leaning down beside Hannibal and hastily opening it for him. He retrieved a few pieces of equipment and began dabbing at Peter's wound, apologising when he winced. The cuts didn't look good at all, angry and red, seeming engraved into his flesh like the writing on a tombstone.

“Is it getting better?” Georgia questioned as Hannibal continued his ministrations with what Will assumed to be some sort of antiseptic wipe.

“It's...”

“S-say it,” Peter hissed. “I'm g-going to die.”

“Not necessarily,” Hannibal assured, soft. “But I think we'll need an antidote to treat this properly.”

“How do we get an antidote?” Will asked, panic starting to rise in him now, looking at the severity of Peter's wounds.

“Sponsors.”

“I- I'll die,” Peter repeated, tears slipping from his eyes as he trembled on the ground. It was gut-wrenching that Will couldn't disagree. The Capitol would never sponsor Peter, not after they all so readily believed Ingram's lies about him. To them, he was a cold-blooded killer, not the harmless and kind person that Will had grown to know.

“We won't let that happen.” Will hadn't expected it to be his own voice that spoke the words. He'd expect *Hannibal*, the person taking care of Peter, to say them, but what could *Will* do? Protect him, sure, but not *save* him. Not from this.

But as Peter glanced up at him, eyes wide and hopeful, he knew he meant it. He couldn't let this happen. He *wouldn't*. Peter was something rare, had something that people his age didn't usually have, since it was snatched away from them so cruelly and so early in this unfair world that they lived in. He had something that was unique to him as a victor, something *no* victor had: innocence. They were all victims, but they'd all done things they weren't proud of. Or were, in cases like Ingram's. Peter was utterly blameless. *Innocent*.

“Is there anything we can do?” Bev murmured, finally breaking the strained and worried silence. “Anything at all?”

“Set up the tent,” Hannibal suggested. “It's already twilight and Peter won't be able to go very far. We should settle here for tonight.”

Nobody said much as they constructed the tent, wordlessly moving around one another in a way they'd done every night since they'd entered the arena. Thinking about it, that hadn't

really been all that long ago, yet it felt like eternity. The arena was truly a horrible place, but an eternity with Hannibal didn't sound all that bad.

A low buzz of conversation drifted through the air from Hannibal and Peter, and Will couldn't help but stop to admire the way Hannibal looked when he took care of people. There was an openness to his expression- not *soft*, exactly, not the way he was when he was with Will, but some mask that made him especially approachable. His sleeves were rolled up a little, flashing Will his forearms, which he… appreciated. Their tan made his skin look beautiful in the evening light and the veins that ran along them made him seem more human than usual, vulnerable and *killable*, only a short distance away from Will. If he only darted over and dug a knife in a little, they'd split open, spraying blood and life. If he closed his eyes he could feel it running through his fingers like thick water.

Not that he wanted Hannibal dead.

“You should get some sleep,” Hannibal advised when he eventually strolled over, leaving Bev and Georgia to crawl into the newly-erected tent, where they were speaking in hushed tones.

“I'll stay up with you a little longer,” he replied, joining Hannibal on the ground and grinning at Peter, who returned it with a weak smile.

“You took watch last night,” Hannibal argued. “It's my turn. You need to sleep.”

“I'm not *taking* watch. I'm just saying goodnight,” he corrected, knocking his knee against Hannibal's in a display of playful affection that rewarded him a hidden smile, directed at the ground. “How are you doing, Peter?”

“B-better,” came his unsure answer. The scratches seemed cleaner, dressed in bandages that were blooming red, rather than the yellowing puss that his wounds had been producing before. It couldn't have been getting less painful, however. Will trusted that Hannibal knew what he was doing, and time would likely do no good for Peter. It was more than a little worrying.

“Is… Is Clark...” They were words neither he or Hannibal expected to hear from Peter, so much so that even that name passing his lips was a sickening experience for them both.

“Is he alive?” Hannibal prompted, and Peter nodded. “I'm afraid so. You'll see in a little while when they show the fallen tributes, but that was Lawrence and Devon back there. Not Clark.”

Peter's accepting nod was shakier than the last one, filled with some deep sorrow and hazy expectancy. He was used to Ingram prevailing by now. Always. And Will had had enough of it.

“We won't let him win, Peter,” he vowed, the conviction in his voice like nothing he'd heard come from himself in a long time. “Not this time.”

“Why- why do you c-care so much?”

“I know what it's like to point at a killer and have no-one listen.”

Did he? *When?* It was yet another mystery that he'd spoken, something he didn't quite understand. Why did he care so much that Ingram didn't win? Why did it matter to him? It obviously wasn't the killer thing, so he supposed he could chalk it up to how much Peter was growing on him. There was something similar between them. Peter reminded him of who he was before all of this, just another timid and lost child. Peter was much older than him, a fully grown adult, but there was something childlike about his wide, trusting eyes and yearning for the pure truth. By accusing Ingram he'd tried to do the right thing, such an illogical but good thing, the right thing, and it had backfired.

It was a tragedy almost as disturbing than the Games themselves. The Capitol's wilful ignorance, their desire to scapegoat the weak: it knew no bounds.

“What do you mean?” Hannibal was frowning at him in confusion, and Will had to admit he had similar feelings about what he'd just said.

“I don't… I don't know. It doesn't matter,” he hastily dismissed, thoughts zipping across his head, making him actively resist the urge to shake them away. “But Peter, we won't let him touch you. We won't let him take anything else from you. We know the truth.”

Peter paused. “H-how?”

“I know a monster when I see one.” He let his hand stretch out to rest on Peter's knee and gazed at him, earnest. “You aren't one.”

“What- what am I?”

“An innocent.”

His smile returned, but this time it wasn't so weak.

“I- I never wanted to h-hurt anyone.”

It was then that the little parachute floated by them, caught by the light breeze and flown to a patch in the grass next to Hannibal. The shock and hope on Peter's face exploded outward like a shockwave, tears springing to his eyes and a tiny gasp escaping from his throat. Hannibal retrieved the sponsor gift, a tiny vial filled with a clear cream, and attached to it, a note. It read: *your word means a lot to them – F.*

“The antidote,” Hannibal breathed, removing the cap and smelling it to make sure.

Will was still stuck on the note. Who was *F? Freddie?* It wasn't like her to do things like this. It looked as if she had a heart after all.

“I'll… live?”

“Yes, Peter. You'll live,” Hannibal agreed, a rare and wide grin on his face as he turned to Will, reverence brimming in his eyes. His voice dropped to a whisper as he spoke again. “The things you can do.”

“What?” His words had thrown Will, though that wasn't to say he didn't enjoy Hannibal's frequent and adoring praise.

“Your word means a lot to them,” he quoted. “The *Capitol*. You *convinced* them. Some of them, at least. They don't all believe Peter's a killer any longer.”

Peter's rushing sigh was one of utter relief as he let his head fall back against the trunk of the tree, the brown of his hair contrasting against the dying green of the damp moss. Will hadn't quite followed what had happened, but he knew Peter was going to live. That was all that really mattered. The future seemed brighter already.

“I… Okay? That was *me?*”

“It was all you. All you,” Hannibal whispered, a thumb curling along Will's jawline, tracing the slopes of his face. He looked dizzy with it all. “Go to bed, Will- it's my watch. I'll tend to Peter.”

“*Fine*,” he acquiesced, leaning over to kiss Hannibal, firm and lingering, before rising from his position on the forest floor.

“I love you,” Hannibal said, *again*, staring up at Will as if he'd hung the moon. Tenderness simply exuded off of him, and Will had to get out of there before he pounced, mouth first.

His dreams consisted of his own name, whispered like a prayer. He didn't need to look too far to figure out who was saying it.

***

The sound of a single cannon, clear as a shot, rang through the air, lingering like a dust storm. It jolted him awake, along with the others in the tent. Georgia blinked blearily across the tent, wiping the sleep from his eyes, and Hannibal stirred beside him. He'd crawled into the tent a few hours ago as Bev had left for her watch, and instead of using the free sleeping bag, he'd squashed in beside Will, body cold but breath warm. He'd slipped into unconsciousness immediately, a deep sleep that had been split open by the cannon, reluctantly dragged to wakefulness. As he shifted upwards, something raw and wrathful was forming in his eyes, and Will knew the same possibility had occurred to him immediately at the sound of the cannon.

“Peter?” Georgia whispered, horrified.

Scrambling outside, Will was met with the sight of Peter's head resting on Bev's lap, his eyes shut. His heart jumped to his throat, wild panic and staggering loss. Georgia gasped from behind him as she emerged from the tent also, but Hannibal was silent. It was a cold rage that Will could feel emanating from him, something dark and furious that Will didn't want to witness. Bev glanced up, noticing them standing there and staring like the world had ended.

“Quiet,” she said, smiling. “He's sleeping.”

Sleeping.

Hannibal had applied the antidote correctly. Peter was cured, and alive.

The sigh that reverberated through them sounded like the wind through the trees. Georgia hurried over, fussing over him and shaking him awake, embracing him desperately. Will finally turned to Hannibal, his anger having dissipated to relief. He was met with a joyful kiss, one of life and gratitude, full and free and in complete view of the others, who were practically facing them. His hands locked around Will's back and he smiled into the kiss, utterly elated as Will wound his own arms around his neck in turn, letting himself be lifted slightly, heady and happy.

They were still intact, and another tribute was dead. Perhaps it was wrong to rejoice in the death of another, but there was nobody else in the arena that he cared for, and he couldn't afford to worry about the sanctity and importance of life this time around, not after the distress it had caused him last year. It seemed insensitive, but it was the only way he could get through this entire experience again, he knew.

“One step closer,” Hannibal murmured into his mouth as he pulled away. He was grinning. “Not long now.”

“What then?”

“Excuse me?”

“We can't *all* win.”

“I'll find a way.”

“You didn't last time,” he said softly, and watched as Hannibal recoiled a little, shame shifting onto his face. “I'm sorry,” he whispered. “But it *is* true.”

“I know,” Hannibal admitted. “We only survived at the mercy of Verger. But I *had* plans. They fell through, is all.”

“What were your plans?” Will questioned, frowning.

“I'll tell you someday. At the end of all this.”

“Promise?”

Hannibal grinned again.

“Promise.”

Chapter End Notes

not my favourite chapter, but i need these fillers to get to the action! I'm hoping to get another chapter out later today/tomorrow (it's midnight where I am) and maybe a few

before xmas. a gift for you all <3 happy holidays!

Chapter 27

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Art had never quite appealed to him. Not conventional art, anyway. He of course could see the art in a beautiful sunset and a pretty pair of eyes, and he of course appreciated it. But art on canvas, sculpture, anything typically *called* art, never touched him in the same way. It wasn't as though he *hated* it, it simply… didn't speak to him. Maybe it was why he found the arena so stunning- it wasn't at all *meant* to be art, as gorgeous as its design was. It was *meant* to be the place where twenty three people died. It was disgusting and morbid. It was beautiful.

But this… this was something else entirely. They'd come across the small crater completely by accident, hidden amongst low hanging leaves and branches along their walk through the jungle. It was unattended and interesting. They couldn't be blamed for checking it out. Inside, however, wasn't a sight they'd been expecting. There were about four or five tributes lying at the bottom of it, curled around each other in near-fetal positions, looking crystalline and frozen where they were settled. Disturbing didn't even begin to describe it.

“It's a colour palette,” Bev had said, and Will had seen. Their slowly contrasting skin tones, fading together to make a manmade colour scheme in the soil. That was how Will came to art, and his inability to connect with its conventionality. This was far from conventional. And admittedly, it was ugly. Utterly. But it did what art was supposed to: it expressed. It made him feel. It was enough.

“The tribute from before,” Hannibal observed. “At the lagoon. The wounds on his back make sense now- he was sewn into this, only he managed to escape somehow.”

“Why hasn't the hovercraft picked them up?” Georgia wondered aloud, peering into the crater, the expression on her face twisted with disgust and confusion.

“Entertainment,” Hannibal answered. “The Captiol does enjoy their controversial figures.”

“They just… let him get on with whatever this is?”

“It's his design,” Will murmured, “his mural. He wanted beauty and this is how he found it.”

“He's an artist?” Georgia asked.

“He imagines himself to be.” Will sank to his knees then, hands drifting to the ground, tangling around strands of grass as he gazed down into the seemingly endless depth of the crater. “He wants to create art. His type of art. This is it.”

“It's...”

“Disgusting,” Bev remarked.

“Stunning,” Hannibal commented, at exactly the same time.

The air between them crackled in confusion, seizing the absurdity of Hannibal's words and increasing it tenfold. Bev didn't know Hannibal like Will did. She liked him, sure, but she didn't understand him nearly as well. She didn't know his bloodlust, his capability for murder, the monster behind the man. Will did, and Will *saw*.

Will loved.

The look in Hannibal's eyes was unparalleled as he gazed down at the pseudo-artwork, worship caught in his eyes. It was similar to that of the reverence he directed at Will, only more clinical, more critical. Will knew before he'd said anything that he was an artist himself, knew just by looking, knew through his mannerisms. His eyes were roving around the display like strokes of a paintbrush on canvas, the drag of charcoal along paper. Will wondered if Hannibal had ever drawn him. Probably, if his confession of the poetry he'd written about Will was anything to go by.

One day, perhaps, if Hannibal's 'plans' did work, he'd read the poetry. He'd see the sketches. He'd go to Hannibal's home, see his room and his bed, and feel his presence in the air like a brewing storm. There was something *intimate* about that, knowing him that way. Knowing his childhood and his roots. His home. It was something he hadn't realised he'd wanted.

“*Stunning?”* Bev repeated, incredulous.

“It's art.”

“It's dead people.”

“Art comes in endless amounts of forms.”

“Even *death?”*

A twig snapped somewhere adjacent to them, not far away in the rainforest. It was the unmistakable sound of a break due to the weight of a human foot, something Will had become accustomed to in the arena last year and further been familiarised with it after many a midnight rendezvous with Molly in the forest. He had no doubt it was whoever had created this macabre mosaic, returning to check on it. Or even worse, add to it. There had been a cannon this morning, after all. It was inconceivable that it was this specific killer, so preoccupied with his artwork that he no longer cared about public opinion or his own safety.

Hannibal's mouth quirked at the noise, at the implications of it. At all the possibilities.

“Even death,” he clarified, eyes dark as they withdrew from the crater and fixed on Will. There was desire there, but Will wasn't sure what for. Him, or murder? Both? Either way, he was about to make some art of his own, and Will knew it. He supposed the others knew it too, in their own way. Not the way Will did. Not so explicitly, not so beautifully.

“We- we should g-go,” Peter suggested, panic blooming behind his eyes. All the bodies couldn't have been easy for him to see, not after his situation from before. But Will didn't

have time to worry about that, was only stuck in thoughts of Hannibal and his capable hands, his *murderous* hands.

“Yeah,” Will agreed. “You guys go on ahead. We'll… deal with it.”

Hannibal's tiny smile grew, excited, eyes flooding impossibly darker. Georgia nodded in quiet affirmation, taking Peter by the elbow and beginning to lead him away. Bev hung back, shock and disappointment twisting her expression, making her hands shake where they hung by her sides. She balled them into fists, and Will saw her jaw twitch with frustration. Having her rage directed him was rare- rage like this, anyway. A stern fury that opposed her entirely, stubborn and ugly where she was usually so bright and filled with hope, throwing out joy like light.

“You aren't like this,” she whispered. “You don't do this.”

“But I do,” he said sadly. “I am like this.” She shook her head, tears brimming in her eyes. “You don't need to see it. Go with Georgia and Peter.”

Her face was rife with disgust and disbelief. This wasn't the person she knew, and it hurt him to show her this. This vile part of him, that darkness he couldn't escape, out there in the open for her to finally witness. Hannibal was the only person that had truly seen it, not just through a camera like the Capitol, but real, present, and *alive*. He'd seen it even when it wasn't on display. And he'd thought it beautiful. Now it was visible to Bev, too. But she didn't see it like Hannibal.

This was what he'd always feared, deep down. Because the darkness had always been there, buried and dormant, and he'd always been aware of it, on some level. Hannibal had simply coaxed it out, urging with pretentious metaphors and charming good looks, drawing out a beast that had only been waiting, waiting for something and someone like this. Bev seeing it was a worst nightmare. Bev *hating* it was even worse, which was clearly the outcome he had received.

“I'll always love you, Will,” she murmured, voice trembling. The air sizzled around them, like the burning of a stove, tension reaching boiling point. “But I don't know you anymore.”

It fizzled into nothing.

And so she left, disappearing into the trees after Georgia and Peter. His heart felt like a solid weight in his chest as he watched her leave, a dissolving remnant of home. This felt unfixable. Bev had truly seen all of him, all the awfulness he'd attempted so desperately to hide. Nobody could accept that, nobody except Hannibal.

“She will forgive you,” he assured, blinking as another twig snapped, far closer than the last time. “In time.”

Will smiled, grateful, despite not agreeing with him. “Thank you. I think we'd best prioritise though.”

Hannibal cocked his head. “Observing or participating?”

“I'm tired,” Will said. “And I've done my fair share of participating over the last few days.”

A grin sprung to Hannibal's mouth, appearing just as a figure came through the trees, dragging a body along with them. As they stepped into the light, Will noted that it was Gray, hair hanging lank around his shoulders and expression curled in anticipation as he stared down at the body he was moving. Hannibal glanced at Will, and then back to Gray, who hadn't yet noticed them.

Will sat down to enjoy the show.

***

“You're a monster.” Hannibal had a scratch on his cheek, which was slowly releasing blood. Will leant up to smear it along his cheekbone, following the contours of his face. “You're my monster.”

When Hannibal kissed him, he tasted of blood.

Gray had put up a fight, but he was no match for Hannibal. He'd barely lasted five minutes before he'd been manoeuvred into a headlock and Hannibal had snapped his neck, a break so clean that Will heard the satisfying crack of it echo throughout the trees. It was shocking. It was gorgeous.

“Am I? How do you define the term 'monster'?”

“You,” he replied, and kissed him again. “The blood you always have on your hands.”

“If I'm a monster then what does that make you?”

“Your keeper.”

We're conjoined, Will had said. He had meant it. Hannibal was like a fucking magnetic force to him, and he couldn't seem to get away. He couldn't seem to want to. This was uncharted territory, and it was dark and dangerous and scary, and he didn't want it to end. He wanted to watch Hannibal murder and bleed and kiss him afterwards. This was who he was.

But was it worth losing Bev? Was *anything* worth losing Bev? He'd been suppressing the darker parts of himself almost his entire life, had only really set them free in moments with Hannibal, and it wouldn't be hard to revert to that. If she wanted. Allowing her to glimpse those rotting and hideous shades of his morality had been a mistake. He should've just… gone with her. Left Hannibal to it. As entertaining and breathtaking as these moments with Hannibal were, Beverly was more important. She was always more important.

Copious wind shook the trees when they caught up with the others, who were resting a short walk away and basking in the sun seeping through the canopy, which shone dappled freckles upon their skin. Georgia shot them a comforting smile as she saw them, and Peter gave them a nod, a kindness. Bev didn't acknowledge them. Her gaze was aimed only at the ground, the moss and the mud and the grass, all distractions from the truth, one that they both knew.

Their friendship would never be the same. This had permanently damaged it, and even if it was possible to salvage it one day, she'd never look at him the way she used to.

It was yet another thing Verger had stolen from him.

It isn't Verger, though, he thought, *it's you*, and he knew he was right. *Verger* didn't create the darkness in him, *Hannibal* didn't create the darkness in him, *he* did. It had been there for as long as could remember. He'd always been different from the other children.

“We should get going,” Georgia suggested, rising beside Peter and throwing Bev a pointed look that she steadfastly ignored, picking at the vegetation at her feet. “It looks like there could be bad weather.”

“A- a storm?” Peter asked, and she nodded.

“Jungles are supposed to be like that, I think. I'm surprised the Gamemakers haven't done anything like it already, so I'm assuming if there's a storm, it'll be a big one.”

“A monsoon isn't ideal,” Hannibal remarked. “If there is one… they're likely to push us all together. How many left now?”

“Eight,” Georgia answered. “Us. Clark. Francis and Reba.”

“Our biggest competition, then,” Will interjected. “Convenient.”

“If only the Gamemakers were more concerned with how *convenient* it is for you,” Hannibal snarked, earning himself a playful elbow in the ribs.

“If only.”

Georgia rolled her eyes at the both of them, leaning down to grab her pack and retrieve one of the swords she'd been carrying. Peter followed suit, gathering the supplies he'd had responsibility over. Beverly barely moved, head tilting forward to swing her hair forward, sleek and thick, concealing her face. Will thought he heard a sniff, which didn't make sense since this was the last place she'd fall ill with a cold. Unless she was crying. Which was a painful possibility he didn't want to consider: Bev, crying because of *him*. Crying because he'd *hurt* her, had put Hannibal *before* her, in a selfish and romantic action that had been so accidentally cruel.

“Bev-”

“Don't.”

“I think you should go on ahead,” Georgia recommended, dropping her pack from her back and letting the weapon fall from her hands.

“But I-”

“Will,” she said sharply. “Trust me. If you want to fix this, I suggest giving her some space. I'll stay.”

“This isn't an economical use of our time,” Hannibal complained. “We can't keep splitting up.”

“I don't care about *economics*,” Georgia snapped. “I care about Bev. Now start walking.” They stood, shocked at her firm and sudden words. “*Go*,” she insisted in that biting tone that women could access so freely to terrify boys.

As they made their way through the jungle, it struck Will how little he'd paid attention to the developing relationships between the others. Bev and Georgia seemed *close*. Perhaps it was because they were the minority of girls within the group, but Will couldn't be sure. He had an inkling that there was… something else. Something more. Some building intimacy that he couldn't quite understand yet. Maybe he would, one day, if given the chance. He wanted the chance. He wanted Hannibal's plans to succeed and he wanted Bev to *forgive* him. He hadn't even apologised, despite being given the opportunity to. Deserving or not, if able to survive this harrowing experience all over again, mending whatever mess had occurred between him and Bev was his top priority.

If, however, was the defining word.

Chapter End Notes

so it's 2am here and i was locked out for a half hour in the freezing cold. it's been an interesting day lol. enjoy the chapter!

Chapter 28

“Why?”

“Why what?”

“Why *that?”*

“Why am I like this?” he asked for her, self-deprecation seizing him. “I don't know. I think I'm broken.”

Bev sighed, head swivelling back to the sky, gazing up at what would be beyond beautiful if it were real. He wished it was real. Seeing the real thing after what felt like an age trapped in some kind of dome was perhaps the most freeing thing he'd ever experienced. It had been a long wait, since being transported from the arena to the Training Center had occurred entirely inside, trapping him all over again in the metal casing of the hovercraft. But then… after. He'd stepped outside for the first time onto that balcony, and the breeze on his skin had felt like the first breath after emerging from underwater. It had been relief; it had been bliss. The thought of feeling it again almost made this whole situation worth it.

“Aren't we all broken?” she uttered, soft. “The Games did things to me, too. Look at my ankle: we have to stop everyday, just to wait for me.”

“That's physical. I don't mean to trivialise it, but that *happens*. At least you aren't losing your *mind*.”

“I get the dreams too.”

“This isn't about some stupid *dreams* we might get on occasion,” he snapped. “You saw me back there. And I saw you. I saw your face when you looked at me.”

“Maybe I was overreacting.”

“Maybe.”

See?

She'd seen. If Hannibal was a monster, Will wasn't just his keeper. He was his partner in crime. A monster like him. Bare and bloody in the naked light of day, kissing the crimson from Hannibal's mouth like liquor. These were his darkest desires.

Bev was trying to ignore it, apparently. Her original strategy had been to simply ignore *him*, traipsing through the rainforest ahead of him and pretending he didn't exist only a few metres behind her. But it had been his turn to take watch tonight. Trust her to finally corner him when he couldn't run away and strike up a conversation with one of the others instead. Even now, however, with everything out in the open, she had trouble accepting the truth in all its ugliness. And how could he blame her? He was barely at peace with it himself. He knew, if

he were miles away, back home with Abigail and Bev surrounding him, then he'd be disgusted with… whatever was going on in his head. But this was here. Murder was *acceptable*, and there was *Hannibal*, his dark eyes and sure hands urging on. Will couldn't resist.

“I really hope it doesn't rain,” she muttered eventually, staring up at the darkness oozing through the canopy and into the body of the jungle. The wind hadn't abated, only grown stronger, shaking the trees where they stood. It sent chills racking through his body, which would usually be uncomfortable if he hadn't spent the better part of a week seeking refuge from the heat.

“I do,” he responded, grinning at her when she rolled her eyes at his lack of agreement. Bev much preferred the hot weather; this was probably paradise for her. Once it started raining or snowing back home, or god forbid *storming*, then he'd never hear the end of it. Constant complaining, all hours of the day, something he thought was a mask for her grief. Storms reminded them of the same thing. They hadn't discussed that in years, though.

“Do you think things would be different?” she questioned, not probing, but carefully enquiring. “If they were alive?”

It really had been years since they'd talked about it. Hearing even an implication of what had happened from Bev's mouth was more jarring than he'd imagined, resting like a physical weight upon an old wound that had never healed. Heartbreak at nine years old was too young, too early for any hope of recovery. Losing his father had been the worst thing that had ever happened to him. But how would it change anything?

“No,” he answered truthfully. “*We* might be different. But I know you still would've volunteered in Abigail's place. I know I still would've kept my promise. We'd still end up right here.”

“Like destiny,” she remarked, wry, and he nearly laughed. There was something so romantic about the idea of destiny, of fate, something that he couldn't prevent from springing to mind whenever Hannibal caught his eyes. Hannibal was his destiny. That didn't mean the Games were, however.

“A little.”

“Do you think he was your destiny?”

“Yes,” he admitted. “I can't… I'm not the same person I was a year ago, before all this. He had a hand in that.”

“Did he make you want… that?”

So, they were back. They'd returned to the issue of his desire for cruelty, that sliver of sadism he'd hopelessly attempted to hide from her. Bev knew everything about him, though. It was no wonder she'd discovered this eventually.

“It's complicated.”

“Did he do this to you?” she asked, voice building with hysteria. He recognised that protective panic that filled her tone, spilling like thick blood throughout her expression.

“It's not *like* that,” he clarified. “I can't deny he was a part of it. But I think it's always been there. I think I've always been like this.”

“I don't understand what '*this*' is,” she exclaimed, frustration mounting.

“You think *I* do?” he retaliated. “I'm sorry. I don't understand it either. There's just… something wrong with me.”

She sighed, rubbing a hand over her face. “I meant what I said, you know.”

“That you don't know me anymore?”

“That I'll always love you,” she murmured, and let her head fall on his shoulder. He pressed a kiss into her hair, and she smelt like flowers. “Maybe… I don't need to understand. I guess I don't need to know *everything* about you.”

“If its any consolation, I wish you could.”

He couldn't see her face. He knew she was smiling, bittersweet and tiny like the curve of his own mouth.

Her head on his shoulder was the best comfort he could've asked for.

***

Rain raged outside the tent, splashing against its sides like ocean foam against the rocks. The material of the tent was thin, so thin that Will worried the rain would soak through and drown them like ships trapped in a bottle. They'd tried to walk a little, after the storm had broken, but it had been impossible to get anywhere, the rain saturating them and the forceful wind pushing them back. The pegs securing the tent to the ground were barely holding as it was, and the tent was rattling back and forth in the gale.

Bev and Georgia were conversing in low tones across the tent, and Peter was squashed up next to Will, who in turn was pressed along Hannibal's side. He wondered if Peter was scared of the storm itself, or of what could be lurking out there.

Ingram, for example.

In rain like this, nobody could keep watch. In rain like this, they could be trapped in here for days. They were more vulnerable than they'd ever been right now, susceptible to attacks from the few other tributes that were still alive out there. Those few tributes included Ingram and Dolarhyde, their biggest threats since the start. Will wasn't sure which he was more terrified of.

“When,” Peter began, voice penetrating the quiet between them. “When will this b-be over?”

“I don't know, Peter,” Will whispered in response, hand finding Peter's hand and squeezing. “Soon, hopefully. There aren't many of us left.”

“I- I want to go h-home.”

“So do I,” he agreed, heavy emotion clutching at him all of a sudden. He missed home. As much as he loved being so close to Hannibal again, getting to see him everyday and *kiss* him, of all things, he missed his bed and his river and his sister. This was exhilarating, in its ways, but it wasn't what he wanted. This was no kind of life.

“I w-want to be s-safe,” Peter corrected, and Will's heart ached for him. Home was only a location, seeing as everybody back there believed he'd murdered innocent women during adulthood, where he had a far better understanding of death and hadn't been in the Games for at least a few decades. They thought him evil.

“We'll protect you. I promise. You're safe,” Will promised, grip curling tighter. Letting Peter die would be something he'd never forgive himself for. Peter *had* to protected, and so did his rare innocence. Its loss would be catastrophic.

“You're s-sure?”

“I'm not sure of anything,” he confessed, embarrassed but sincere. “I can't afford to be sure of anything in the arena. I'll try, though. I'll try.” His voice was raw and hushed, and Peter bowed his head at the sound of it, jaw clenching.

“Th-thank you,” he finally spoke, strained. “For- for everything.”

“No need to thank anyone,” he dismissed. “What are friends for?”

Peter's grin when he lifted his head was blinding, joyful, and it took Will's breath away. He hadn't expected to connect so profoundly to Peter and Georgia, but here he was, wondering if he could ever live without them. Getting attached had been a bad idea. It had been something he'd vowed to never do, something every tribute vowed never to do, but he'd only done it last year. He'd failed terribly and ended up *falling in love*, of all things. It turned out whether he considered the possibility of attachment or not, he was incapable of stopping it.

You have a habit of collecting strays, Abigail had told him once, coming across him feeding another of the skinny dogs in the alley behind their old house. He'd rolled his eyes at her and defended that someone had to feed them- the fact that they kept returning to see him wasn't of his own volition. It had been her turn to roll her eyes when they'd even followed him to the Victors' Village.

Perhaps her statement had some truth to it, and not just in relation to his dogs. He seemed to gain friendships like moths to a flame, unwanted but deeply appreciated.

“H-he's looking for m-me,” Peter suddenly shared, a frown on his face as he stared at one of the tent walls, trembling in the wind.

Will didn't need to ask who 'he' was.

“We don't know that, Peter,” Hannibal interjected, but Peter was already shaking his head before the words left his mouth.

“I do,” he murmured. “I know. Y-you don't know him like I d-do. I… I d-disrespected him.”

Ingram seemed like the type to preoccupy himself with something as meaningless as that. In fact, so did Hannibal, but that was another issue entirely. Peter, while not a threat at all, was now in danger because he told the truth. A truth that happened to slander a prideful psychopath.

“Like I said,” Will reminded, “we're going to protect you. If he tries anything...”

The wave of fury that encompassed him cut his sentence short. He couldn't even put into words how it would feel, having Ingram attempt to hurt Peter. All he could imagine was striking out and watching red flood from his body, feeling it between his fingers, black under the moon. It wasn't as if he hadn't thought about hurting Ingram. His smug face whenever he looked at Peter made Will want to feel his fist connect with his face where everybody could see, humiliating him the same way he'd humiliated Peter. He'd accused him of murder and everybody had listened. He'd relentlessly tortured and discredited and already mentally ill man for all of Panem to see, even resorting to petty tactics like dropping weights on the floor and pretending he'd been injured by a poor, harmless individual that had only wanted justice for the dead. He was despicable, and Will had never wanted to hit anyone more.

“Hopefully Francis will get there first,” Hannibal remarked. “However skilled Clark might be, I don't think he's any match for the Great Red Dragon.”

“Are any of us?” Will wondered, not wanting to cast his mind in that direction but unable to stop himself. Dolarhyde was one hell of a fighter, and he wasn't sure if even *Hannibal* stood a chance against him.

“Together, perhaps,” Hannibal mused, with a brief and meaningful glance at Will, tongue peeking out to run itself along his lips, eyes dark and half-lidded.

Georgia had cleverly taken one of the glass casings their dried food had been in and stood a lit match up inside it, balancing it with bottle lids and placing it in the centre of the tent to allow them a little light. In the flickering flames cast throughout the tent, Hannibal glowed. It was like that night with the fireworks, endless colours splashing across his face as if they were paint thrown on a canvas, working their way into Will's system until he was drunk with them. If they were alone, there was no telling what he would do. Finally act on all urges coursing through him like hot blood, maybe.

A pipe dream.

They wouldn't both get out of here. He wanted to trust Hannibal, he really did, but what 'plans' could he possibly have that would save them all? Being alive after this experience was growing more unlikely the more time that passed, as the numbers of tributes dwindled and they slowly became the only ones left. Will didn't know how much longer he had.

Death was waiting in the shadows, a patient friend.

Chapter 29

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Occasionally the rain would let up, and they'd seize the opportunity the moment it presented itself, carrying their half-packed supplies and preparing to settle down again as soon as possible. They'd manage to get the tent set up just in time, usually, warned by Hannibal that rain would soon be coming. *I can smell it in the air*, he'd explained when Will had asked, who rolled his eyes in response and kissed him. A few days passed like this, stolen private moments and fragmented sleep. It had begun blurring again, like the last time. If by some miracle he made it out of the arena alive, he knew looking back he'd only remember sweet kisses and heavy rain, interspersed with blood, gushing like a waterfall. That was how his head seemed to make sense of things.

The blood… Will didn't want to say he *missed* it, exactly, but he'd never been fond of Dolarhyde and Ingram. Bev looked at him different now, and it *hurt*, but what did it matter? He'd probably be dead in a few days, a softened memory for her to mourn. If he died trying to rid Panem of evil like the Dragon or Peter's abuser, then he'd consider it a just death. It was better than going peacefully in his sleep, that was for sure. He'd been mulling it over a few days, the only thing to keep his brain occupied, and he'd already half-convinced himself that he *had* to do it, if only to put his mind at ease.

Sooner or later, events would escalate. It was only a matter of time, really.

“Where's Peter?”

Bev's surprised and sudden question that broke through the silence was lined with deep concern as her gaze fluttered around the jungle like a lost butterfly. They all followed suit, eyes locking to the spot that Peter *should've* been, a few paces behind Bev, and glancing around once they realised it was empty. The pull of fear below Will's navel was gutting, like the ground had been ripped from below his feet, leaving him light-headed and woozy. He'd known *something* would be occurring soon, but he hadn't predicted the irony of its immediacy.

“He's… gone?” Will guessed, trying to keep his panic at bay. There had been no cannon, so he was alive.

“Gone *where?”*

“Well we need to find him,” Georgia cut in, crossing to where he seemed to have disappeared. “Which way do you think he went?”

“It could've been either,” Hannibal said, hurried in a way that almost made Will believe he was worried. But Hannibal wasn't like that. Suspicion clouded his judgement and he narrowed his eyes as Hannibal continued to speak. “Georgia, you should head west with Beverly. Will and I will go east.”

There was no debate. No discussion. Hannibal grasped him by the wrist and ushered him away in the direction he'd indicated. Will waited until they were just out of earshot of the girls, having stumbled through the undergrowth a little, and turned to Hannibal, confusion shifting in his expression.

“Why were you so adamant we go this way?”

“I wasn't *adamant*.”

“*Hannibal*,” he warned. “You know what I mean. You were… certain.”

“The leaves were crushed,” came his answer, only serving to bewilder him more. Hannibal smiled in fleeting affection at his puzzlement, linking their hands as they persisted through the rainforest. “The leaves were crushed as if they'd been stepped on. Recently. Meaning Peter isn't that far ahead of us, provided we travel east.”

Will paused, a little taken aback at the ready intellect he always forgot Hannibal had. Hannibal simply grinned, a shark who could smell blood in the water, and scented the air almost imperceptibly, had tilting back and nostrils flaring ever-so-slightly. He didn't need to specify why- Will had witnessed this action more than he cared to admit over the past few days. Soon, it would rain.

“Why do you think he left?” Will asked.

“Why do *you* think he left?”

Did he really have to think about it? The answer seemed clear enough, slowly becoming more obvious as the trees thinned, panning out into a small clearing that held a situation that Will wasn't quite expecting. The light of early evening illuminated two figures that stopped Will's breath in his throat. Ingram was the one on the floor, for starters, on his knees in the mud with his hands held up, seemingly pleading for mercy. Will had no doubt that any power imbalance that left Ingram weaker was most definitely an illusion. Peter was shaking above him, like the tent in this endless and fractured storm. A hammer hung from his hand, contained by a loose grip, and Will recognised it as one of the few weapons Peter had carried, had *let* himself carry, because he was really so good that he didn't want to hurt anyone, not even in here. Because a hammer did less damage than an axe, right? That was certainly true, but when it came down to it, both could get the job done. Both could kill.

“Peter, you're confused,” Ingram was saying, and rage rose in Will, rapid flames, burning heat like the hot from Hannibal's kisses, the sweat that layered his body when they'd walked further than usual.

Peter wasn't stable, technically. But Peter wasn't a *liar*. Peter wasn't *delusional*, he'd only wanted fairness for innocent victims of whatever Ingram claimed not to be, and despite all the odds, all the fear that must have accompanied it, he'd told the truth. Will respected that, and more importantly, Peter was his friend.

A friend he'd promised freedom from predators like Ingram.

“Peter,” he was whispering, deafeningly loud in the quiet air, revealing their presence, moving forward to place a hand on his shoulder. The tremors continued to rack his arm, and he turned his gaze to the hammer he was holding. “Peter, you don't have to do this.”

“H-he needs to… He can't. D-do that. Not to a-anyone else.”

Even his reasoning was pure. This wasn't an act of vengeance, it was self-sacrifice. Peter's soul for the protection of others.

The first time Will had killed someone, he'd been sick.

The second time he'd killed someone, he hadn't felt a thing.

He couldn't remember how many he'd killed since then. Not many, surely, but he'd forgotten to count. Their lives had diminished to nothing at his hand, and so he'd labelled them irrelevant. Their deaths irrelevant just like their lives.

“You don't have to do this,” he murmured. “You're no killer.”

“He deserves to die. I think… I think I hate him.”

“Peter,” he repeated, and felt Peter's arm droop as he let the hammer slip from his clammy hands, hitting the ground with a thump. His breath left him in a surprised rush, and he stumbled back a little. “It's okay.”

He turned, bowing away from where Ingram was staring up at them with faux-innocence and manufactured fear, and started treading away, aimless, dazed. When Will heard the soothing hush of Hannibal's comfort behind him, he knew Peter was safe. A bit traumatised, but *safe*. Hannibal was assuring him that it was alright and he could go back, go and find Bev and Georgia, who were searching for him the same way Will and Hannibal had. People cared.

There was a smirk on Ingram's mouth that disappeared the minute he remembered Will was still there, focusing on him, and he regained control over his face within a matter of seconds, successfully recreating the terror that had previously been there. A perfect mask. A masquerade.

But his eyes. They were dead.

“Graham-”

“Shut up,” Will hissed, feeling hatred contort his expression. “Don't even *try*. I know the truth about you.”

“Why, Graham, I'm willing to bet you don't *know* anything,” he replied in that infuriating and smug tone of superiority that had always rubbed Will the wrong way. “If you believe Peter then you're a fool. What proof do you have?”

Will smirked. It was refreshing to watch someone so arrogant believe they had they upper hand. But which of them was on their knees?

“This is the Games,” he answered. “I don't need proof.”

The sound of his axe embedding itself into Ingram's skull was a satisfying one, the crack of bone and squelch of blood and the long, everlasting groan of death that escaped his mouth. The cannon was a sweet accompaniment to it.

The axe was tilted from Ingram's head, the redness pouring around it was blood, flowing and building, dripping down his face, deadly decoration.

The quietened voices he could hear behind him stopped, the minute the axe had made impact with Ingram's head. Thunder crashed and rain broke from the clouds, absolution, instant and cleansing. Lukewarm and torrential, the rain felt kind on his skin, a reward for this death. It almost diluted the blood, turning it pink as it continued its trail down Ingram's dead face.

There was suddenly crunching of leaves, the sound getting smaller and smaller until it was almost inaudible. His neck prickled as he felt a figure draw nearer, their breathing laboured as they stood shoulder to shoulder with him, looking down at the corpse that was still half-upright, swallowing. There was some vague, distant drumbeat in Will's head that echoed there, mournful and joyful all at once, anticipatory.

“Will,” Hannibal began, and then he was falling further into his eyesight, stepping in front of Ingram and blocking him from view. His eyes were wide and smitten as he drunk Will in, a flush on his cheeks and awe in his slack-mouthed stare. Reverence shone from his face like moonlight and raindrops trailed across his skin, tender. “With all my knowledge and intrusion, I could never entirely predict you-”

His hand ventured up to fit against Will's jaw.

“-I can feed the caterpillar, whisper through the chrysalis, but what hatches... follows its own nature and is beyond me.”

Will let his eyes stray up to Hannibal's, which were mere inches away, filled with rapt hunger as they fixed on Will's mouth. His own mouth had been pulled into an involuntary smile, one he was seemingly unaware of or unable to control. Their foreheads brushed.

“Will Graham,” he said, so hoarse it was practically silent, so giddy he could barely form words, “the great love of my life.”

Then his eyes were clenching shut and Will was being kissed, soft; precious. His stomach swooped, overwhelmed at how gentle Hannibal's lips on his were, how sweet his touch was, curling around the back of his neck. His mouth moved against Will's, selfless, delirious, tiny gasps fluttering between them as the kiss progressed. A storm erupted above them, a sky of wrath and lust, deadly sins surrounding them. Excitement raced through him, static and desperate.

When Hannibal pulled away, his eyes were blown black, pupils blocking out whatever humanistic brown had been there before, a solar eclipse of desire and astonishment. He sighed, lovestruck and wanting, hand not moving from its position, the pads of his fingers stroking along the nape of Will's neck.

“Darling Will,” was his mumble, as he pressed further forward to bury his face in Will's hair, crushing him against his chest in a loving embrace. “My magnificent, bloody boy.”

“I only killed him,” Will muttered in response, and Hannibal choked in surprise and near-hysteria, hands almost frantic where they had started trailing up and down his spine, one of his eccentric little methods of affection. It seemed to Will that their position should probably be reversed; Hannibal was far more of a mess than he was.

“You *butchered* him,” Hannibal remarked, wonder coating his tone, taking the edge off his harsh use of language. “I love you,” he confirmed, shocked at his own conviction and emotion. “I love you.”

“I know,” Will said, shifting away to look Hannibal in the eye. Hannibal looked *ill*, dizzy, cheeks abnormally flushed and eyes dark as night, endless with his love. His hair stuck to his forehead with wet precipitation, clumped together and untidy in a way that Will knew Hannibal would never allow if he weren't so distracted right now. “Hey, I *know*,” he repeated. “I love you too, you great sap.”

“I don't think you're simply my keeper,” Hannibal noted dazedly, smiling as he did so. “Perhaps you're a monster, too.”

The love of monsters. It was built on brutality and lethal bloodlust, but was soft underneath, delicate like each individual eyelash that Will could count of Hannibal's if he really tried hard enough. Rain was caught there, trapped like flies in a spider's web, like stardust balanced on the edge of a cliff, avoiding the great fall to come.

And wasn't that them in a nutshell?

Chapter End Notes

bye bitch! hope you all liked clark dying, i know i did :))
anyway, merry christmas to all of you who celebrate! if not, have a lovely day.

Chapter 30

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The fall was an eventuality, no matter how much they attempted to avoid it. Nobody could live forever, especially not in the arena. They would suffer in some way or another, Verger would make sure of it. They'd defied him, or he'd *let* them defy him, and that wasn't something he could allow any longer. Theirs would not be a quiet death, hidden amongst the forest to be mourned in silent respect. Theirs would be a humiliation, a destruction, a *fall*. It was the only possible ending.

The rain hadn't seemed like it would end anytime soon, so once they'd made their way back to their original path through the jungle, they'd erected the tent with the help of the girls and Peter. Nobody mentioned what occurred, but Bev steadfastly avoided his gaze, turning her back as they settled into sleep. He grit his teeth and ignored the tugging at his heart, only burying himself further into Hannibal's chest, all-encompassing and warm comfort. If she'd been there, if she'd seen Ingram's brutal but passive manipulations, then she might've understood. But she hadn't been there. She couldn't judge.

When they'd awoken to dawn's breaking light, the rain was finally clearing up, grey stormclouds disappearing to allow daylight sun through the canopy. It was the same rain as the rain they'd kissed under. Will had tilted his head back and let himself catch the last few drops on his face, a reminder. A goodbye.

Hannibal smirked at him as he did so, lip caught between his teeth. His eyes were a dark and endless pools of desire.

“Do they expect us to turn on each other?” Georgia wondered as they trudged onward, thinking aloud. The near-awkward quietness they had obtained the night before had mostly continued today, heavy around their necks like nooses, suffocating the words from them. He was glad she'd spoken, but there was little hope of it being private. The others weren't uttering a word.

“Yes,” Will answered simply, bluntly, knowing it was all he could say without choking on his words. The idea of it was torture so cruel he didn't dare to fathom it, all outcomes of the situation being a worst case scenario. “We're practically the last ones left.”

“To be fair, there are still a few obstacles in the way.”

“Dolarhyde, you mean.”

“He's no Silvestri,” she replied, and he had to admit she had a point. Dolarhyde possessed power that victors like Silvestri hadn't even come close to within the reasonable span of his life. People like him had won due to a fluke, and couldn't quite be compared to careers or sheer forces of nature like the Dragon.

It didn't take away from the fact that very little of them remained, however.

“Maybe not. But that doesn't make him invincible. There are five of us and two of them.”

“You really think we could win?”

“There's definitely a chance,” he admitted. “And… that's what I'm scared of, to be honest. What if we do win? What then?”

She paused, and he could almost hear the thoughts assembling in her brain. The sounds of the rainforest swept on around them, frogs and birds and predators moving throughout the trees. The footfalls of the others ahead of them, steady as a heartbeat.

“I won't kill you,” she muttered after a little silence. “I don't want to kill anyone. Not after last time.”

“Not even if you had to?”

“If I had to… that's different,” she admitted, looking pained as the words left her mouth. “*I* don't want to die, either. But I'd like to avoid it, if possible. I… don't want to *be* like that. Not again.”

“You shouldn't blame yourself,” he said, soft, pity overwhelming him. “Everybody did things they regret in there. It's a dark place, and you were young. You weren't thinking straight.”

“You can say that again,” she mocked, self-deprecation shifting across her face like waves on the sea. “People did some bad things, yeah. But to the extent of what *I* did? Not as common.”

“At least you *regret* it,” he argued. “Look at Dolarhyde. Ingram. *Wells*, even. They did things just as bad as you, potentially *worse*, and they're *proud* of it. Were. Whatever. You get what I mean- you're different. Don't paint yourself as evil when people like that exist.”

“I just wish I didn't remember it,” she struggled out, her voice hoarse. “I couldn't at first. But over the years, things started to come back to me. Screams, blood… *skin*. I'm too afraid to watch the replay again. I suppose I'm lucky I was so out of it after the Games, I don't remember a thing about that interview. If I did… I don't know who I'd be. What I'd be.”

“You'd be Georgia Madchen,” Will whispered. “You'd be you. Exactly as you are. So, you lost your mind a little. The Districts *certainly* don't judge you for that and if the Capitol do, who *cares?* They have no idea what it's like in here. How things can get to you. And I think… I think *you* need to accept that too. This doesn't represent us as people. This is us when we're cornered and scared and angry. This is us when we have no other alternative.”

“Maybe that *does* represent us as people,” she mused. “At our most base and our most primal. Maybe that's what we truly are; what we'd be without civilisation and society.”

“I don't think so. *Complexities* make up who we are. We can't be reduced to a simple set of desires, not when things like art and music exist. We're more than the caged animals the Capitol wants us to think we are.”

He wouldn't admit it, of course, but he believed she had a point. Perhaps not one he agreed with *entirely*, but the idea had some merit. What if this *did* represent him? What if this was what he truly was? There was all this stuff he had ignored his entire life, bloodlust and darkness, dormant and deep inside of him, and it was being dredged up to the surface like a tidal wave. It made him hot all over and itch to touch Hannibal, push him down in the blood and the mud and have his way with him, the sound of cannons like a distant fanfare. He had never felt so alive as he had when he killed, with Hannibal's kiss waiting for him right afterwards.

It was a possibility that they were both right, really. People didn't have to be confined to one thing.

“I hope you're right,” was Georgia's response, but it was saddened, void of any real optimism.

Will hoped so, too.

***

Twilight was falling over them when they began noticing the cracks in the ground. It was odd, considering they'd recently occurred days on end of torrential rain, making the ground muddy and wet and uncomfortable to walk on. Now it was dry; a dying brown colour in the lessening light and cracking where it lay. Why they didn't assume it had a deeper meaning was lost on Will, seeing as almost everything had a deeper meaning in the arena. Dry ground after bouts of rain. It defied nature itself.

And then, they grew.

The cracks began stretching further across the forest floor, lengthening, nestled amongst the greenery. But the greenery slowly decreased, disappearing where the cracks widened, dotted about their journey through the arena. It was when Bev managed to stop Georgia from toppling over into a crevice that they hadn't noticed was blocking their path, snatching her back by the upper arm just in time, that they finally realised that *something* was off. It reminded him that awful ditch from the first arena, that had closed in around them, a tightening vice. That was what the always arena had been, especially at the end. They'd tighten the vice, pull in the walls, and throw them together like rabid animals in a fighting ring. It made for a fantastic finale to some great fictitious story that had been spun for the Capitol, and a bloody reminder for the Districts: *this is your children's fate.* It was as if the Capitol saw it through rose-coloured glasses, saw the beauty and the intrigue but ignored the pain. That was the effect of privilege, Will supposed.

“We're here,” Hannibal murmured as they stared in horror at the gaping rupture in the ground, like the split after an earthquake.

“Where?”

“At the turning point of the Games. This is where it ends.”

“The rain,” Will blurted out, quite ridiculously, and without context. But he saw Hannibal smile, understanding. He knew the way Will's mind worked.

“They're herding us,” Hannibal elaborated. Last time, the Gamemakers had used the rain. This time it was the ground. Water and earth, two of the elements. Will couldn't decide whether it was clever or vapid, whether it was bursting with originality or severely lacking it.

People were about to die, and there was a large chance it could be them. Despite what he'd said to Georgia, he had no delusions about the possibility of Dolarhyde winning- he was a fearsome opponent, after all, and there was every chance that even against the five of them, he could win. A small chance, but a chance nonetheless. The Dragon was something far more than human.

“How long, do you think?” Bev asked, glancing around, a little nervous, tone on edge. “Until we meet them.”

“Hours at most,” Hannibal answered, and looked to the sky. Well, what he could see of it. “Perhaps they'd like to do it at night, this year. Add a little dramatic flair.”

It was certainly a plausible theory, not to mention a terrifying one. Fighting Dolarhyde and fighting Dolarhyde in the dark were two entirely different things. Will didn't possess the same skills as Hannibal, the same weathered experience as Georgia, or the same quick survival instinct of Bev. He didn't have Peter's lucky ability to avoid massacres and he especially didn't have the same brute strength as the Dragon. Will felt like the weak one, here.

Hannibal didn't think that. Hannibal didn't look at him like that, and Will knew it. Otherwise, why would Hannibal drag him along to situations like Silvestri and Wells, or Peter and Ingram? He clearly *wanted* Will there, and whether that was simply to show off or because he actually believed in some kind of strength Will may have, he wasn't sure. But Hannibal looked at him with a reverence, a respect. After Will had killed, he had cupped his face and recited what Will suspected were lines from his poetry, pretentious metaphors of caterpillars and butterflies, eloquence through evolution.

He'd miss Hannibal's voice, when he was dead.

Because there was no good outcome from this. If Dolarhyde won, they'd be dead. If they won, they'd be trapped in a situation where only one of them could prevail. Fighting amongst themselves would only result in chaos, with half of them trying to protect each other and trying not to hurt anybody too badly. Unfortunately, that wasn't how the Games worked. The Games dealt in absolutes; tributes would live or die and that was the end of it. Allies were gained and lost. The Gamamkers manipulated. Simple facts of life for those who became tributes or, god forbid, victors. Whoever won this, while losing so much more and so much else, they'd always have the title. The best of the best. The ultimate winner. What glory that would bring.

What loss that would bring.

“What do we do?” Peter asked, voice cutting through Will's reverie.

“We carry on,” Hannibal answered readjusting his pack and stepping over the crack like it was a simple puddle, a footprint.

“What good will that do?” Bev questioned.

“What good will staying put do?” Hannibal retaliated with a shameless grin, aimed over his shoulder, before he turned back to the front and started walking onward.

Within seconds, Will was hot on his heels, knowing the others would soon follow. He had a point, really. Staying put would either allow the Gamemakers to lead Dolarhyde toward them, or provoke the Gamemakers into more fatal natural disasters to get them moving again. Hannibal's decision wasn't at all ridiculous, nor was it unfounded. But Will knew he'd regret it- he wasn't ready for this. The end had arrived so quickly, the days behind were now nothing but grains of sand rushing through an hourglass, tiny fragments of memory that might just fade into nothing within the hour. This was his second time around, and he'd gotten lucky last time.

This time would bring the end.

Chapter End Notes

not one of you asked for this but my vague points of reference at this point were hannibal looking kinda like this and will like this. at this point in the series will is supposed to be 17 and hannibal 19 so those images are far from accurate but closest i could get while writing

Chapter 31

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Darkness fell, and the Dragon emerged.

His silhouette was sinister and black, shadowed against the background of trees, monstrous and advancing on them. Night had blanketed around them as they'd walked, growing ever-darker as time passed, the blinking stars through the canopy a guiding light to lead them to here, the set finale that Verger had perhaps always had in mind for them. It had brought them to this point, this set of crossroads, where the jungle ended, a curved treeline that levelled out onto a rocky surface, that ended with a sharp jut at the end. Will couldn't see over it. He didn't want to.

The Dragon moved away from the trees, the opposite side of the clearing. His figure was broad and threatening, and Will saw something dart behind him through the rainforest, moving away, scattering, fleeing from whatever was about to occur. The world rested on a pinpoint, the sharp edge of a knife, a moment that was razor-thin. Dolarhyde knew they were there, turning his gaze up to the sky and standing in wait for them. Will's heartbeat moved in time to the wind.

“Go,” Hannibal hissed, turning to them, eyes fixing on Georgia. “Leave. Find Reba, and run. Leave Will and I.”

“What?” she asked, frowning at him, shocked. “We can *help*-”

“No,” he interrupted, uncharacteristically blunt and nearly *rude*. Will raised his eyebrows at him, surprised. “This is between us. Reba isn't like him- she won't hurt you. Find her, and run.”

“Where?”

“Anywhere,” he answered, “they'll find you.” And then he was stepping out into the open, not giving Will time to ask who *they* were. There were other questions, too.

Where's anywhere?

Before Will could think through what he was doing, he was dragging Bev into a tight and mournful embrace, a hand running through her long hair. It had lost its shine over their days in the arena, but not its smooth softness, or the way it hung endlessly past her shoulders, a waterfall of ink. Pressed between their chests was her necklace, that gift from her father, a chrysanthemum on a string. She had carried it into that first arena, flower over her heart, and had carried it into the second. Will took a brief second to think at how little he noticed of her, sometimes, drawn in by the glory Hannibal exuded.

“I love you,” he whispered, and heard her release a gasp as he pulled away, scared, unwilling. Her expression was filled with screaming despair and desperate helplessness, and then it was gone. He'd turned away into the cold arms of the dark, abandoning her to the warmer prospect of safety.

Hannibal was shining in the rich, liquid night. Standing opposite the Dragon he looked even more fearsome, some great and nightmarish monster that belonged to *Will*. He followed Hannibal, exposing himself to Dolarhyde, who's eyes were tiny pinpricks of light in the darkness, swivelling to focus on them.

Electric sparked through him, a heady rush. He swore he could feel his heart pumping blood, sending it swimming through his veins, a red tide that would be unstoppable once this began. He heard distant footsteps, growing quieter as the seconds ticked by. It eased his hurtling thoughts, if only a little. Whether death would come for him or not, the others were safe.

“Will,” Hannibal uttered, and Will looked over, pinning himself like a butterfly under his unmoving gaze. “Whatever happens…”

He trailed off, and glanced away, throat bobbing. The moment tore in half, thin as paper.

Dolarhyde's mouth curled, and then he lunged.

It was this altercation that made Will remember just how little experience he had, especially against opponents of such power. Hannibal, on the other had, knew exactly what he was doing, and ducked under Dolarhyde's outstretched arms, which managed to collar Will, hauling him round, locking him against his body with a strong arm and even stronger grip. Will couldn't see what his other arm was doing, what it was swinging behind him to reach, but the stinging explosion of pain in his cheek afterwards was a fair indication that Dolarhyde had been reaching for a knife, and had succeeded on hitting his mark. Will didn't know what made Dolarhyde drop him- Hannibal, presumably- and he didn't care. His cheek was throbbing, pain spreading rapidly throughout his face, racing across his neurons, making him tumble to his knees, mouth open in a silent scream, filling with blood. Animal noises of combat sounded around him, and he raised a hand to the knife protruding from his cheek, feeling the blood bubble and flow around it, oozing from the new hole in his face that was only being stoppered by the existence of Dolarhyde's instrument of torture.

Pulling it out was agony, pure, debilitating. It popped out like a cork, blood exploding from its place, a small river of wine. It was slipping down his own throat, and Will wondered if he could get drunk on it. Maybe that, at least, would dull the pain. Through the haze of torment, he saw Hannibal and Dolarhyde fighting, feral and clashing under the night sky. It was a canvas of black that he hadn't glimpsed in weeks, as steady and patient as the sea. Stars were dotted around it like tiny droplets of rain.

Dizziness struck him as he finally staggered to his feet, charging at Dolarhyde, unsteady as he attempted to distract him from Hannibal, who looked pale and exhausted as he received a reprieve from Dolarhyde's insistent strength. Will lodged the knife into Dolarhyde's thigh, blindly aiming, hoping that it hit some important artery where it landed. He was shoved back to the ground in an instant, the breath being knocked from his lungs, winding him as the very

same knife was plunged into his collarbone, incapacitating him more with every hit. His head swam in pain, drowning in it all.

Yells of agonising hurt flew above him, deep and dying. They were loud in a way that was so un-Hannibal, suggesting to Will that they were maybe originating from the Dragon. As he crawled to his hands and knees, agony striking him with every throb of his body, blood pouring from his wounds, his sight confirmed his theory: Dolarhyde, stumbling back, away from Hannibal. Hannibal, who had an expression of pure savagery plastered on his face, the face of a killer. He was made for this. His eyes met Will's, dark and alive, encouraging. Because he thought that *Will* was made for this, too, a monster just like him.

It was practically gift-wrapped.

Pain was a state of mind. So was fear. He didn't have to feel either. Numbness curled through him like ice in his veins, like fire in his blood, like expensive alcohol down his throat. Yanking the knife from his shoulder, he barely felt a thing, instead shifting it into a swift blow at Dolarhyde, catching his abdomen and *tearing*, a sharp thrust down, leaving ruptured flesh and sinew behind. Hannibal, with a weapon Will hadn't known he possessed, made similar movements, cutting him in turn. He roared in anguish, legs buckling underneath him, sending him crashing to the rocky ground.

A bleeding and burning dragon. A diminishing beast. So many people looked small in death, but Dolarhyde was not one of them. He was as big now as he'd ever been, larger than life, falling at their feet like a felled tree, the impact of his knees on the ground deafening to Will's ears, paired with the sound of blood pumping through him, a lit fire of murderous energy. The Dragon was vanquished, and yet…

Their attacks did not cease.

It was only until after the cannon went off, leaving the Dragon splayed on the floor like a broken ragdoll, blood spilling like a pair of wings, that they stopped. The Great Red Dragon. The Tooth Fairy. Nothing but a bloodied corpse, another victim of Hannibal Lecter and his endless date with Death. Will felt honoured to even be there, to be witness to such an act of beauty. Such an act of violence. So quintessentially Hannibal.

“Will,” he was mumbling, clutching his side where he must've been struck. Sweat beaded from his forehead, mixing with blood as it dripped down his face. He was gazing at Will like some wounded deity in the blackness.

Will himself could scarcely look at Hannibal, deathly and striking, and instead stared down at his own body, raising a hand to the night. Thick, dark liquid caked his fingers, staining his flesh, warm and sticky. He recalled that conversation with Hannibal, that first night they'd really kissed, and he'd bitten him, wanting. The sight of his own blood was the only thing Hannibal had looked away for, before his eyes were inevitably drawn back to Will, a magnetic force of desire and devotion. They were both bleeding this time.

“It really does look black in the moonlight.”

It was so quiet that he could hear the hitch in Hannibal's breath, floating across the space between them, lighter than air. He dragged himself away from Dolarhyde on weak legs, stumbling across the rocks until Hannibal met him, falling against each other at the edge of the bluffs. When Hannibal caught his eyes, Will realised why he hadn't been lamenting his inability to see the sky before tonight: he had his very own substitute. Hannibal's eyes were dark as night, wet with tears like rain, holding unparalleled adoration that could've stretched on for miles. There was no use denying it any longer- that darkness inside of him? It wasn't inside any longer. It lay plain to see, horrifically visible on the surface, ugly and deviant for everybody to see. It didn't matter anymore. He had this. He had Hannibal.

Their pulses bounded in union, hurtling to some unfathomable epilogue that Will wasn't sure should be feared or coveted.

“See,” Hannibal breathed, and the memories rushed back, bloody fingers and old streetlights. He inhaled, shuddering. *See?* “This is all I ever wanted for you, Will. For both of us.”

Trembling, he ducked his head, demure, shy as his eyelashes brushed Will's cheek. It was like the first brush of a summer breeze. How Will loved him, his great, foolish monster. He regarded the scene behind them, the bloodied remains of the Dragon and his red, flaming wings. It was always meant to be this way. It was always meant to be him. He was the only one worthy of it, deserving to die so gracefully and brutally at the hands of Hannibal Lecter and Will Graham, and it perhaps would've worked the other way around.

But they had won. They had vanquished the Dragon and here they stood at the edge of the bluffs, inches from toppling over into the abyss below. Their final resting point. What a way to go.

“It's beautiful,” Will admitted, hushed. Hannibal's breath stopped entirely. No sound escaped him.

Will tugged him closer, hand reaching desperately for his shoulder. He felt Hannibal react to him, bending to his will, fingers tangling in his shirt as he hung on, head rocking back, nuzzling against Will's as it went. Will didn't need to look to see that his head was tilted in overcome euphoria, expression contorted in ecstasy so powerful it bordered on agony. This was all he'd wanted, all he'd dreamt of. Will was fulfilling his deepest and most desperate desires, simply by his decision to participate and not just observe. That was the power he had over Hannibal, and it was a strong one. All he had to do was ask, and Hannibal was there. Like a dog to heel.

His head came to rest over Hannibal's breastbone, and entirely unwillingly, he felt a tear slip from his eye, sweeping through the blood splattered on his face, clear and pure. Love. Look at what it did to men: made them weak and made them strong, all at once. Hannibal's heart rocketed under his ear, tripping along, overwhelmed by it all. But Will… Will was at peace. Will was at one with the world, could hear the wind howling through the trees, feel the rocks under his feet, jagged, bloody.

See?

The swirling clouds around them, the mist of want and love and sheer joy. The broken body of the beast they'd slain, bleeding out into nothingness. Turning to dust.

See?

The darkness below them, the daunting peace it offered, the sinister opportunity of freedom.

See?

Will *did*. He saw where they were and *what* they were. If that were evil, then so be it. He saw that the Capitol were the *real* savages, delighting in the pain of others. Arguably, he and Hannibal did the same, but at least they didn't profit off it. They did it because it was necessary. Because they had no other choice. Because they enjoyed it.

He saw.

And then he didn't.

There was only oblivion as he hauled them over the bluff, entwined, tumbling them into the black beyond.

Chapter End Notes

third part here! thank you so so much to all of you that have kept up with this fic. It really means a lot. Now, onto the next part!

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